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UNSEEN HANDS

UNSEEN HANDS

BY

ROBERT ORR CHIPPERFIELD, pseud. of
Ostrander (Isabel [illegible])

Author of "The Second Bullet"

L. C.

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1920

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UNSEEN HANDS

CHAPTER I

TERROR

IT was a week since Julian Chalmers's tragic young death and the fourth day after the funeral, and yet the odor of dying flowers and the chill gloom which only so mournful a function can radiate seemed still to cling about the spacious room. It bore an air of unfamiliarity, too, which was due in part to the fact that the massive old furniture had not been replaced with the exactitude which its long-established position warranted.

The little faded woman who appeared noiselessly on the threshold and peered within much as a mouse might have done seemed at once to sense the general atmosphere and perceive its source. She entered, and as a light footfall sounded upon the stairs she laid her slender arms about a huge old arm chair and strove with all her frail strength to move it toward the table.

"Oh, Aunt Effie, what are you doing?" The words were more an awestruck exclamation than a question, and a young girl halted in the doorway as had the older woman at first. She was small and lithe; a dark, gypsy-like

creature who would have been pretty in other circumstances. Now her big soft eyes were deeply encircled, and her clear dark skin chalkily pallid.

"Peters and Gerda have been sadly careless in rearranging the room, dear. I suppose I must not scold them at—at such a time, but I should have seen to it myself." The little lady's voice was low and as colorless as her personality. "You know your stepfather always likes this chair nearer the light."

"Well, do let Peters attend to it later and come into the dining-room!" It was not impatience but entreaty which sounded in the seemingly impulsive cry. "It's—it's simply horrible in here! Haven't father and the boys come down yet? Rannie's always late!"

"You have no patience with his infirmity, Nan, child," her aunt responded in gentle reproof as she followed the girl into the brilliantly lighted dining-room, where at one end a round table had been laid for six. "Remember he cannot run up and down the stairs as quickly as you."

"Oh, I did not mean to be unkind!" Nan Chalmers spoke in quick remorse, and her eyes darkened as she added in a half whisper, "We should none of us be unkind to each other, should we? We can not tell which will be the next to be taken!"

"It is the Lord's will." Miss Effie's soft, resigned voice was lost in the clear, flippant tones of a young man and the deep rumble of that of an older one as Richard Lorne and his eldest living step-son entered the room together.

"Remember, Eugene, not to speak of this to your aunt—" Lorne broke off abruptly as he caught sight of Miss Effie standing beside the cold hearth.

"Oh, Aunt Effie knows as well as we do that things always run in three's," Eugene responded nonchalantly enough as he moved toward the table; but his light eyes wavered and a slight flush mounted to his sleek golden hair and receded, leaving him more pale than before. He turned to the younger sister, who was so unlike him in type, and asked with a flippancy which the quivering of his rather weak chin belied: "Why so tragic, Nan? It'll be me, not you; and the infernal jinx that is over this house will have to work quick, for next month I'll be twenty-five—"

"Silence!" His stepfather's round reddened face puffed out in anger, and his close-clipped gray mustache fairly bristled. "If you have no heart, at least preserve a semblance of decency and do not jest about—about matters which have bowed all our heads in grief!"

His tone grew husky toward the last, and his slightly prominent blue eyes filled as he turned away.

Nan laid a cool little hand over his.

"Don't mind Gene, father. He's only trying to cover up his own feelings; I know him!" She spoke with infinite tenderness; and it was evident that between the girl and her stepfather a very real affection existed. "Come, shall we wait for the other two?"

"I'm here!" A thin, high, whining voice with an indescribably sarcastic undernote in it replied to the question; and a distorted, humpbacked figure came forward. Randall, the youngest of the Chalmers children, was a boy of about eighteen, and dark like Nan, who was two years his senior; but there the resemblance ceased. Her witching charm seemed in him to be changed to a malevolent humor, and his thin lips were twisted, by past pain perhaps, into

a perpetually sardonic leer. In his correct, somber mourning clothes, cleverly built to conceal as much as possible of his infirmity, he nevertheless made one think irresistibly of a jester in motley as he slid sinuously into his seat at the table and made an impish grimace at his sister's face.

Richard Lorne turned to the impassive butler.

"Dinner, Peters. We shall not wait for Miss Chalmers."

Soup was almost finished before the beauty of the family appeared. Christine was twenty-two and resembled Eugene in her coloring save that her blondness was of a colder, more brilliant type, and there was no hint of weakness in her exquisite, perfectly chiseled features. She carried herself with the assured air of one conscious of her beauty; and her elaborate crêpe gown made the more simple mourning of her sister and aunt appear dowdy by comparison.

"I've been frightfully busy," she announced as she seated herself. "It's a bore to try to separate the sheep from the goats; but one simply must know whom merely to send cards to, and who must be replied to personally. Why do people send condolences, anyway?"

"Usually to be on the safe side in case they might have been remembered in the will." The cripple looked up with a shrewd twinkle in his sunken eyes.

"I hope, my dear, that you have not touched the pile of correspondence on the desk in the library." Miss Effie Meade glanced at her butterfly niece in nervous deprecation. "I have it all nicely arranged for Gene; he says that he will attend to it this evening."

Christine tossed her head.

"I meant my own personal mail, Aunt Effie. I assure you, it's quite enough for me to take on my shoulders."

Gene opened his lips as if to retort, but evidently thought better of it and with a shrug devoted himself to his fish. The dinner progressed in silence to its close; but when Peters at a nod from Richard Lorne had placed the coffee upon the table and departed little Miss Effie glanced about and said timidly:

"We—we mustn't go on like this, you know. The—the loss of our dear ones—". She put her handkerchief for a moment to her brimming eyes. "To have my poor sister and her dear son taken from us so suddenly and with so short a space of time between is heartrending, but it is the Lord's will and we must not complain. If we go on as we have been, we shall have Peters talking to the other servants about us. We are acting as if—as if—"

"As if we were afraid!" Randall, the cripple, thrust himself forward suddenly in his chair. "Must we be hypocrites eternally? We grieve, of course, each in our own way, and that concerns only our own souls if we have any, but there is something else back in the minds of all of us and that is fear! Even you, even Dad! Why, look around the table! Aren't we each asking ourselves: 'Will I be the next? Will I be the next?' Do we *believe* it was the Lord's will?"

"This is madness!" Richard Lorne put down his coffee-cup, which he had held suspended in a shaking hand while he listened as if hypnotized to his step-son's harangue. "Let us hear no more of this, this wild raving! I believe you are losing your mind! You know that the deaths of both your mother and brother were due to perfectly natural

causes: accidents. If you do not still that mad tongue of yours I will have you put away!"

He strode from the room, and Randall laughed shrilly.

"You see? Can't bear to have his innermost thoughts brought to the light of day!"

But the others were not listening. Instead they were glancing about as he had bade them; and each read in the eyes of the others the nameless thing which had been locked in their own breasts for an interminable week.

In all eyes save those of their mother's sister, Miss Effie; they shone through her tears with an almost fanatical light. After a moment of silence she rose and put her arm tenderly about the cripple's shoulders.

"Come, Rannie, you are all overwrought, and the fever mustn't rise again. You know what pain it always brings. Lie on the couch in my room and let me read to you for a while."

The boy flung her off impatiently.

"Let me alone, Aunt Effie! I'm not a child, I tell you! I'm wise; wiser than all of you!"

Nevertheless, he suffered her to lead him from the room and preceded her when, on the threshold, she turned.

"You'll find the light just right, I think, over the desk, Gene," she said. "Don't work too late, dear. There are so many letters, and I can find time to help you in the morning."

As the door closed Christine began to sob hysterically.

"I'm going to get out of this dreadful house to-morrow!" she cried. "I've felt ever since p-poor Julian was found as if s-something were hanging over my h-head! I'm

going to Dorothy Landis's and stay; I'd go to-night if I c-could!"

"Sure, run away," Gene sneered coldly. "If it is your turn next you'd probably slip on a banana-peel or get in a taxi accident before you reached the Landis place! Stick around like a sport, but watch your step and see what our jinx has in store for you!"

"Don't say such dreadful things, Gene dear; you're almost as bad as Rannie." Nan raised her white, serious face and looked straight into his. "You know you don't believe in evil spirits any more than I do. There is no use in denying that I've felt just as Cissie has all this last week; but it may be that we are all just nervous and apt to imagine things. Why, even poor father showed it to-night when Rannie burst out like that! If we could all be as stolid and calm as—as Peters, for instance."

Gene laughed.

"The impeccable Peters is carrying a newly acquired rabbit's foot! Fact. It fell out of his pocket when he stooped to pick up Dad's cane this morning. Nobody saw it but me, and I thought best not to make any inquiries just then. I've no doubt that Marcelle has one of those little Rintintin figures concealed somewhere about her person at this moment; and Jane and Gerda must be sporting whatever their particular fetishes are, too. I'm not trying to be funny!" he added. "I'm just showing you which way the wind is blowing."

"They are stupid, ignorant things," Nan commented. "But I've heard that fear is contagious; and although I don't believe in a jinx, I do believe that our thoughts can work on the people around us for good or bad. Now, sup-

pose that one of us got this fear—which would be ridiculous if it were not so horrible!—and communicated it to the rest?"

"Nothing doing," Gene replied. "If a whole lot of people think the same thing it's bound to be true; not come true because they believe it, but be true from the first. You wait and see what happens next!"

Christine moaned, and regardless of her coiffure burrowed her head still deeper into her folded arms upon the table.

"If we'd try to think sanely for a minute, we'd realize how impossible any connection between mother's death and Julian's could be." Nan spoke decidedly, but her voice trembled and lowered as she mentioned those who had gone. "Dear mother ran a needle in her hand and blood-poison followed; that might happen to anyone, there is nothing strange about it."

"No, but there *was* something strange about the infection that set in and spread in spite of what the best specialists in the country could do; you heard them say that, themselves!" Gene retorted. "And I suppose it wasn't queer that when Jule's razor slipped while he was shaving it should just nick the jugular vein? Well, I'm going in and start upon those beastly letters. Thank the Lord, Aunt Effie got them sorted for me!"

"I'm going to pack!" Cissie jumped up as he departed. "Of course you won't go while Tad lives right next door and can run in and out any hour of the day, but I—"

"But you!" Nan interrupted hotly. "You want to go because the sorrowful atmosphere of this house won't be conducive to the comfort and pleasure of Farley Drew!

Because he knows that he isn't welcomed here by any one but you and Gene! He'll probably be welcomed as your guest by the Landises; they don't know him as I do!"

"You're only a child." Cissie smoothed her crêpe draperies complacently. "What could you know of a man of the world like Farley?"

"I know that he has led Gene into all the trouble he was ever in, and poor Julian, too! That's enough for me!" Nan poured herself a cup of the cold coffee. "How you can be so stupid, Cissie!—"

But Cissie had trailed from the room, and her younger sister was left to her own thoughts.

In the smoking-room back of the library Richard Lorne was closeted with Samuel Titheredge of Titheredge, Gore & Wells, attorneys and counselors-at-law.

Samuel was as long and lean and lantern-jawed as Lorne was short and stout and round-faced; and the two had been friends since their university days thirty years before. It was with the freedom, then, of absolute camaraderie that the lawyer advised his client.

"Dick, don't be an ass! Go to the authorities with what, I should like to know? Sad as the affair is, I can't see that there is anything strange about it. It isn't at all unusual for two members of one family to die of different causes within a month of each other. Buck up, and if there is anything left in your private cellar take a swig of it before you go to bed. Why, man, there isn't even a coincidence in the affair! If you take such a cock-and-bull story to Headquarters, do you know what will happen? You'll get a lot of derisive notoriety that you're not looking for; and

afterward when somebody proposes coming to you with a nice tidy investment, somebody else will tap his forehead significantly and suggest another broker!"

"But I say that there is a coincidence, Sam," Lorne retorted doggedly. "I may be an ass; but I've lived with this thing in my mind ever since the poor boy was discovered lying there dead in the bathroom, and I've had time to think it over. The deaths were both on the face of them the result of accidents; but they might have been deliberately designed to *appear* as accidents. Do you get me? That needle which pierced my poor wife's hand might have been doctored beforehand; and anyone knowing the state of Julian's mind might have made a sudden noise behind him at a critical moment when the razor was near the artery. It would have taken a devilish clever mind—"

"Or an insane one." The attorney uncrossed his long legs and added casually: "Your theory presupposes, then, that it was an inside job?"

For a long moment the two men stared at each other; and then Samuel with a shrug settled back in his chair once more.

"You see, Dick, you're going nutty about this thing. Just get the poor lad's estate in order and I'll have the necessary papers ready for you to sign. Then go away somewhere; try to amuse yourself and forget."

"You have the papers ready to-morrow morning, then. I have a complete statement and accounting for every penny that his mother left him already prepared; I was going to turn it over to him, in any event." Lorne paused and added: "I suppose if another coincidence of the same kind occurs in this family within a short time and doesn't involve

me as the central figure, I shall be able to convince you that there is something in my hallucination, after all."

"I should be sorry to hear of such an occurrence," the attorney responded slowly. "But if it should happen I—yes, I'm inclined to think that I might be able to take it a bit more seriously than I can at present. If you had a single clue, a single shred of evidence to support your crazy idea—"

He paused as Lorne held up a warning hand. Steps were approaching over the bare library-floor, and the inevitable knock upon the connecting door was followed by a cough of deprecation.

"Come in, Gene," Lorne called resignedly.

"It's about one of these con—one of these letters of condolence, sir." Gene hastened to correct himself, and with a far greater respect than he exhibited toward his stepfather in private. He meant to appear always at his best before the attorney who held the family fortunes, if not in his grasp, at least under his supervision. "It's from a woman—er—the stationery is not quite like that used by any of our acquaintances, and I can't make out the signature—'Mabelle' something."

"Let me see it!" Lorne demanded with an almost unprecedented irascibility in his tones. Gene passed over the table a flamboyant lavender envelope, and did not betray by a flutter of his downcast yellow eyelashes that he had observed not only his stepfather's sudden agitation but the attorney's start of surprise.

"I'll reply to this one; I see it is addressed to me—" Lorne was beginning when a terrific crash in the library made him start from his chair.

"Why, it's the portrait! The portrait of grandfather that hangs directly over the desk where I've been at work! It must weigh tons!" Gene had wheeled about, and his squeal of terror died in his throat as he turned again to face the other two, his own countenance convulsed with horror at the thought he could not utter.

For a moment they stood spellbound and then leaped past him and through the open door. The life-sized portrait with its massive gilt frame had crashed down over the desk and the space where Gene had been sitting but a minute before, splintering the heavy chair to matchwood.

"If Gene had not come to us with that letter just when he did—". Samuel paused.

"The third coincidence would be complete," Lorne finished for him. "He would have been crushed to atoms. Beginning to believe in my crazy idea a little bit, Sam? Beginning to see that there is some damnable reason for it all?"

"I'm willing now to admit the coincidence, Dick," the attorney said cautiously. "But the legal mind is not adapted to ghost-hunting; and I'd like to address your attention to the strands of wire cable which held the picture to the wall. They have been hacked almost through!"

CHAPTER II

THE UNSEEN HAND

RICHARD LORNE bent forward, his stout knees shaking beneath him, and examined the cable-ends where they protruded from just under the edge of the frame. The tips of the sundered steel strands glittered as if burnished, and some had been turned inward from the force of the blows which had parted them.

He glanced up at the inscrutable face of his companion.

"What devil's work has been going on in this house!" He spoke in an awestruck whisper.

For answer the attorney merely touched his finger suggestively to his closed lips with a scarcely perceptible shake of his head as Gene hastened toward them.

"Dad!" The young man's face was working convulsively. "That didn't just happen! It couldn't! Why, it doesn't seem as though it fell at all, but as though something pulled it down over the place where I'd been working only a minute before. Look at the wall!"

The two older men raised their eyes and saw a number of small, deep, round holes spaced at regular intervals which roughly outlined the size and shape of the portrait, and then glancing down at the upturned back of the fallen picture beheld a row of stout iron stakes, equally spaced driven outward from the under part of the frame.

"That's a mere detail," Samuel commented. "Evidently the person who hung the portrait did not put any too much faith in the strength of the stakes driven into the wall; and wisely, seeing what has occurred, he supplemented them by the steel cable which has just parted, as you see. You had a narrow escape, then, Eugene; but it was sheer accident—"

He was interrupted by a patter of little silken mules upon the stairs, and in another moment Cissie and Nan rushed into the room and paused, rooted to the spot at sight of the fallen picture. Both were clad in kimonos, and with the golden curls and straight, fine, black hair flowing about their shoulders and mingling as they clung instinctively to each other, they looked like little children. It was Nan who first drew away from her sister's tense embrace. She could see only her father and the attorney, for Gene stood behind them, and as she advanced the childish look left her face.

"Where is my brother?" Her tone rang with tragic grief through the room. "Is he there, beneath that—?"

"Nan!" All the good in the boy's weak face shone forth as he sprang forward and caught her in his arms. "I'm safe! I missed it by a fraction of a minute!"

"How did it happen?" Cissie's voice rose shrilly, but before anybody could reply a faint cry came from the doorway behind her.

"Gene! You are hurt! Something has happened!"

Looking more mouselike than ever with her gray hair lying in soft folds about her face and her slender figure encased in a drab dressing-gown, Miss Meade glided into the room.

"No, I'm not hurt, Aunt Effie. I had just gone to ask Dad about one of the letters when the portrait fell," Gene explained as she stood swaying, her thin, delicate hand gripping his arm until the fingers almost disappeared in the folds of his coatsleeve. "Mr. Titheredge says it was a sheer accident, but after what Rannie said at dinner to-night; after we know how we've all felt since Jule—" He broke off and added: "Ouch! Aunt Effie, you hurt!"

She removed her hand from his arm and repeated mechanically in a dazed fashion:

"You had gone to ask your stepfather about one of the letters?"

"Yes. These condolence things, you know. But I'm sure it couldn't have been an accident! Why should that one picture in all this house have fallen just at the moment when I left the desk? I'd been sitting there for more than an hour."

"What a merciful blessing that you escaped!" Miss Effie spoke in a low tone, then added quickly with a sharper note: "But I—it was I who asked you to reply to the letters, and suggested that you use the library desk here! I even arranged the light for you! Had you been killed it would have been my fault!"

"Come, Miss Meade, that's all nonsense!" Samuel Titheredge stepped forward. "No one can foresee accidents; and that portrait has hung there more than twenty years without falling. In any event it is all right; Gene wasn't hurt, and you and the girls had better go back to bed and try to forget all about it."

As if conscious for the first time of their appearance she

glanced down shrinkingly at her own attire and then turned to where Nan and Cissie stood.

"Mr. Titheredge is right; let us go back to our rooms. I—I should never have forgiven myself if anything had happened to Gene!"

When she and the girls had taken their departure the attorney turned to the white-faced young man.

"You, too, Gene. No use trying to clear up this mess to-night, and your Dad and I have some business matters still to talk over. You've had a bad shock and you must try to get a sound night's rest."

"Do you suppose I could sleep?" Gene turned on him hotly. "You and Dad may be blind, but I tell you I know there is something horribly wrong! We are dying one by one, and I was scheduled to be the third! There was no coincidence about any of it. Someone is trying deliberately to do us all to death, someone who knows what we are doing from hour to hour!" His voice had risen to a shrill scream. "How can you shut your eyes?"

Titheredge compressed his lips and nudged Lorne, who glanced at him and then spoke with sudden sternness:

"Eugene, you are hysterical! You are behaving like a child! This matter of the fall of the portrait will be thoroughly investigated to-morrow, but meanwhile you must try to pull yourself together. Things will look different to you in the morning. Go on up to bed like a good chap, and let Mr. Titheredge and me finish our conference."

Gene went shakily from the room and they heard him ascending the steep, old-fashioned staircase. Waiting until his footsteps had ceased with the thud of a closing door, Lorne turned to his companion.

"Nevertheless, Sam, the boy is dead right! There is something horribly sinister back of the whole thing, and it is an insult to even his intelligence to try to convince him of the fallacy of mere coincidence. I'm not going to wait until morning and perhaps find some other member of the family dead in bed! At the risk of the derisive notoriety you were talking about a little while ago I'm going to have the authorities in here now!"

"I agree with you that it looks very much as if some human agency has been at work. We can at least be certain of it in this last case, with the evidence of the cut cable; but it is after midnight, and I don't believe another attempt will be made to-night." The attorney's calm, sane voice fell upon the other's ears like a dash of cold water. "Besides, if you call up now you'll have a mob of heavy-footed, matter-of-fact plainclothesmen in here who wouldn't be able to comprehend your almost superstitious apprehension and who would obliterate any clue which may remain. There is just one lad in the Homicide Bureau at Headquarters who could understand your point of view and carry out the investigation with the necessary tact and discretion if we are to avoid undue notoriety, and that is Barry Odell. I'll stay here to-night with you and keep guard if you think it necessary, turn and turn about; and in the morning we'll go down to Headquarters. I'll have a word with the Commissioner, and we'll bring young Odell back with us."

Agitated as he was, Lorne saw the wisdom of the attorney's advice and accepted it. After a further examination of the fallen portrait they turned out the lights and went upstairs. Samuel elected to share his friend's room;

but sleep did not come and they were still discussing the extraordinary chain of tragic events when Lorne stopped in the middle of a sentence and held up a warning hand.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered after a moment.

"What? Don't let your nerves run away with you, old man."

"Nerves nothing! Don't speak aloud! I'm sure I heard a step out in the hall."

"Well, I didn't, and I've keener ears than you," retorted Titheredge.

Lorne padded softly to the door and listened for a space of several minutes, then turned away with a sigh of relief.

"I guess I must have been mistaken. I'll go to pieces myself, like Gene, if I'm not careful. God! I wish this night would end, and we could get hold of that young fellow you spoke of! Perhaps it would be better, though, to go to some private detective agency and avoid the police."

"And have your home overrun with operatives, every member of your household shadowed and their affairs investigated; and nothing to show for it but a bill as long as a Japanese letter?" Titheredge demanded contemptuously. "Use your head, Dick! I wouldn't recommend this young—"

He paused, silenced by a swift gesture from his companion.

"Listen! Do you hear it—that grating, gnawing sound?" It was a cool September night and the windows were open, but the sweat was pouring down Lorne's chubby countenance. He padded to the door as before, then beckoned insistently. "Come over here! Don't you dare pretend—"

With an expression of boredom the attorney rose and tiptoed across the room. He placed his ear to the keyhole for a minute and then straightened with a shrug.

"Of course I hear it. Mice or even rats in the walls; you can't drive them out of an old house like this. That's probably what you heard before." He resumed his seat. "You can hear all sorts of noises at night if you only listen for them."

"I suppose so," Lorne muttered somewhat doubtfully as he went back to his chair. "I could have sworn, though, that it sounded louder than any rat."

"As I was saying when you interrupted"—Titheredge ignored the last remark—"I would not have recommended Barry Odell to you if I didn't know all about him and his capabilities. He's young still, about twenty-eight or thirty; but I've watched his work on a couple of murder cases, and I tell you he will go far."

Lorne stirred uneasily in his chair.

"Murder! That's rather a strong word, isn't it? We don't actually know yet that those wires were severed; and we don't want the affair treated as an ordinary murder, or series of them. It's the devilish ingenuity of the whole thing that staggers me, Sam." He drummed on the arms of his chair. "If they hadn't come so rapidly, one after the other within the month, any sane person would have sworn they were each the result of pure accident! How could my poor wife have been poisoned before my very eyes? And Julian; what terrible influence could have made him slash his throat in just that vital spot? It would have been unbelievable except for the damning evidence of those cut wires!"

"I thought you just said that we did not know they were actually cut," the attorney put in quietly.

"D—n it, I don't know what to think!" exploded the harassed little man. "When we discuss it the whole thing seems wildly impossible; and yet I feel it, the entire family does! Can you ask a police detective to go on that?"

"You can ask Barry Odell to start at the ends of those severed picture-wires and be certain that he will finish the job, no matter where the trail leads him—now, what's the matter? Got a listening-spell on again?"

For Richard Lorne's rotund form had tensed, and his ear was turned to the door. After a moment he relaxed with a grunt.

"Thought I heard footsteps again." He rose. "Let's go to bed and try to get a wink of sleep. If I keep on hearing things I'll be a wreck to-morrow; and I want to have all my wits about me, if I ever had in my life!"

Morning dawned with a hint of autumnal frost in the air, and Lorne shook his peacefully slumbering companion.

"It's seven o'clock, Sam. I just rang and told Peters to have breakfast on the table in ten minutes, and to order a taxi. For heaven's sake, let's get on downtown and interview your man!"

"Eh?" Titheredge stretched his long, lanky frame. "With you in a minute, Dick."

His host was dressed first and nervously consulted the clock on the bed-stand.

"Eight minutes past," he announced. "I'll go on down ahead, old man, and see if breakfast is ready."

He closed the door after him, and the attorney heard his footsteps die away down the hall. Then all at once there

came a hideous, sickening crash, and the sound of a heavy body hurtling down the stairs.

Collarless, Samuel Titheredge tore open the door and rushed to the head of the stairs. Other doors were opening, and voices in which Gene's nervous tones mingled with higher feminine ones in a chorus of startled cries; but the attorney was oblivious to them. His gaze traveled from the top step of the stairs, which had collapsed like cardboard, to the bottom, where a huddled figure lay.

Leaping down, he raised the head of his friend and called sharply:

"Peters!"

"Sir?" The white, frightened face of the butler peered from the dining-room door.

"Bring some water, quickly! Mr. Lorne has fallen down the stairs."

The ice in the glass tinkled violently as Peters obeyed, and the attorney watched his face closely as he bent over his unconscious master.

"Is—is he hurt bad, sir?" The butler clutched the newel post as he straightened his shaking knees.

"I don't know yet. How is it that you did not hear the sound of his fall and come to his assistance?" He fairly shot the question at Peters, and the latter responded haltingly:

"I didn't hear anything, sir; I was in the back pantry." A slight flush came into his pale cheeks. "I didn't know anything was wrong until you called me."

"Well, go and telephone for the doctor at once." Titheredge passed over the palpable lie. "Then come back here and help me lift him to the couch in the library."

The family, in various stages of disarray, had appeared at the top of the staircase and were demanding in frightened accents what had happened, but Titheredge had ears for none of them as they rushed down and crowded about. Lorne was breathing stertorously, and under the shock of icy water dashed into his face he opened his eyes at last.

"I say, what—". The sentence ended in a groan as he strove to sit up and fell back again. "My arm!"

Titheredge noticed then that his left arm was crumpled and twisted under him, and when they lifted him and bore him to the couch it swung limp and useless at his side.

He opened his eyes once more as the attorney bent over him and the others gathered about.

"The stairs," he whispered faintly. "The top one collapsed as I pressed my weight on it. You remember the noise I heard last night?"

Titheredge nodded briefly, then turned to the others.

"Move back, please, all of you, and give him air." As they obeyed he asked: "Feel better now, Dick?"

"Yes. My side hurts a little when I breathe, and that arm's broken, I think; but I'm lucky not to have been killed." In a whisper once more he added: "I'm all right. Don't wait here a minute longer. Go and get your Barry Odell."

CHAPTER III

WHO KNEW?

"WHERE'S that taxi?" Titheredge demanded of Peters in the hall. The latter stood near the vestibule talking with two workmen, who, in overalls and with their tool-kits slung over their arms, turned lowering faces toward him.

"Taxi, sir?" Peters started in surprise and then opening the door he peered out. "Just drawing up at the curb, sir. Now then, you two, move one side there and let the gentleman pass."

"Who are these men?" Titheredge paused.

Peters hesitated for a moment and seemed to turn a shade more pale.

"They say they were sent for to do a bit of carpentering, sir, but I tell them there must have been some mistake; they've got the wrong address I imagine, sir."

"Nothin' doin'!" The burlier of the two men stepped forward determinedly. "Someone telephoned to the boss yesterday to send a couple of us up here at half-past seven sharp this morning to hang a big picture; said it would have to be spiked to the wall. We're paid for our time."

The attorney turned and looked searchingly at the cowering butler before addressing the truculent workman.

"There's no mistake; but the work can't be done now.

What's it worth to you to go away and come back just after the noon hour to do the job?"

The two consulted together and sulkily named their price. As the attorney paid them, he asked:

"Who is your boss? Where is his shop?"

"Bill Kenny, sir." The generous tip which Titheredge had added to the sum demanded had evidently had a mollifying effect. "His place is over on Eighth Avenue, near Fiftieth. Thank you, sir. We'll be back right after noon."

They touched their caps and started down the hall toward the servants' staircase which led to the tradesman's entrance, and the attorney turned to speak to Peters; but that wily individual had disappeared, and after a moment Titheredge opened the door and started thoughtfully down the steps. He had caught the butler in two deliberate lies within the space of an hour, but he gave the matter little thought. All the way downtown to Police Headquarters his mind was busied with one problem. Who had telephoned from that house to the shop on the previous day? Who had known that the picture was going to fall?

The Police Commissioner had not yet reached his office, but a brief interview with his secretary put one of the smaller examination rooms at his disposal, where the attorney was joined shortly by a brisk, smiling young man whose clean-cut features and almost boyishness of manner gave no hint of the police department. His forehead was broad, with just the hint of a scar above one eyebrow; and the merry blue eyes themselves as well as the high cheekbones beneath betokened his ancestry as much as his name proclaimed it.

"Good morning, Mr. Titheredge. Did you want to see me?"

"I do, Sergeant; you are the only man who can help me out. Moreover, I know that the case I've got for you—if it is a case at all—will be one after your own heart."

They shook hands; and as the attorney seated himself Sergeant Barry Odell asked with a canny twinkle in his eye:

"A matter for the Homicide Bureau and you're not sure whether it is a case or not? No trace of the body, then?"

"The bodies were there all right," Titheredge responded grimly. "But there was no thought of foul play until last night. You see, I have a client in whose family two deaths have occurred within the past month, but they were thought to have been the result of accident; separate accidents of a widely different nature. Now we have reason to believe that they were brought about in some mysterious manner by an unknown person who seems determined to kill off the entire family. These people have been friends of mine for years as well as clients, and as far as I know they haven't an enemy in the world. We haven't a sign of proof and no clue except some pieces of clipped wire. Could I go to any other man in the department but you with such a story and not be a laughing-stock?"

Odell smiled, but his face grew serious as he replied:

"I don't know, sir, but I've been wondering myself why we hadn't seen Mr. Lorne down here before this."

"You!" Titheredge's imperturbability deserted him, and he stared. "What on earth do you know about it?"

"Only what I've read in the papers, but when I saw about that young fellow cutting his throat by accident and just in the place where it would do the most good—or harm

—and that he was a son of the lady who'd died not a month before from a needle-thrust in her hand I thought there was something mighty queer about it all." Odell shrugged. "However, nothing came to the Bureau about it, and it's not up to us to go out looking for trouble. Tell me about it from the beginning, Mr. Titheredge."

"There's little to tell about the two cases if you remember the newspaper accounts, and I would rather have you get the details from the members of the family themselves; but I'll tell you a little about them before we start." The attorney settled forward in his chair. "Mrs. Lorne was the widow of Halsey Chalmers, the rich broker, when she married Richard Lorne five years ago. She had five children all practically grown up except the youngest boy, a hunchback. Her spinster sister, Miss Effie Meade, two or three years her senior, had always lived with her since her first marriage, and that composed the family up to a month ago. Then Mrs. Lorne died; and last week her oldest son Julian was taken off, as you know.

"I don't mind telling you, Sergeant, that I had some quick work then to keep a suspicion of suicide out of the press; for Julian had been pretty wild and had caused his stepfather and me a lot of trouble about money matters —squaring up for scrapes he had got into, and that sort of thing. His own father, Halsey Chalmers, had left an independent fortune to each of the children; but he had tied it up until the boys became twenty-five and the girls twenty-three. I was one of the executors of his estate and co-guardian with their mother. When she married Richard Lorne we put the inheritances into his hands for reinvestment, and he has almost doubled them. I know because we

always had an accounting every few months. When Julian became twenty-five, three years ago, he was glad enough to leave the principal in his stepfather's hands, for the interest was enough to content him; but lately he had gone far beyond it and—er—requested that the principal be turned over to him. This request was made just after his mother's death."

"Usual reason?" asked Odell.

Titheredge nodded.

"A woman. Naturally, neither his stepfather nor I wished to see his fortune dissipated, and we reasoned with him. We even went to the length of hinting that we would take legal steps to keep the control of the money out of his hands. Sheer bluff, of course, for he was perfectly normal mentally, with no settled vices, and we shouldn't have had a leg to stand on. But he took it seriously and threatened in an outburst of temper to kill himself rather than be kept in leading-strings. There was nothing to it, of course; but you know when the papers get hold of a thing—"

He paused, and the detective asked:

"Did any of the family suggest that it might have been suicide?"

"No. None of them knew of that absurd threat except Lorne, and the idea has never entered his mind. He and I have been busy settling Julian's estate; the terms of his own father's will decree that it be divided equally between the living children, since he died unmarried.

"That is how I happened to be there last night, when I learned from Lorne that not only he but all four of the children have felt a sort of superstitious fear ever since Julian's death that there was something more than coin-

cidence in the two tragedies, or accidents, or whatever you choose to call them.

"No one had mentioned it; but I gather that the cripple, Randall, made some sort of outburst about it at the dinner-table last evening, and that sort of brought the matter to a head in Lorne's mind. Anyway, when I arrived a little later for a conference with him he told me of his suspicion that those so-called accidents might have been devilishly planned.

"He couldn't suggest anyone who might be guilty, nor a motive, and I laughed at him; but while we were talking something occurred that seems to put solid fact behind his wild theory."

He told of the fall of the picture and Gene's escape, and the young sergeant listened with the keenest attention.

"You are sure about those wires being hacked apart?" he inquired when the attorney had finished. "The portrait has been hanging there for years, you say? Couldn't they have worn through?"

"Impossible. The strands hadn't parted from age; their tips were bright where they had been severed. I want you to come up and have a look at them for yourself; but first let me tell you of a further affair this morning, which to my mind leaves no doubt that someone, either inside the house or with a confederate there, is trying deliberately to exterminate the whole family! That sounds ridiculous, I know, in these days and right here in the heart of the city; but I have seen what I believe to be the evidence of it with my own eyes."

He proceeded to describe the events of the night and

early morning; and the detective's merry twinkle vanished in a vacant, narrow-lidded stare of concentration.

"You did not hear the footsteps?"

"No. I was so stubbornly confident that no further attempt would be made on any of the family for a few days at least that I thought poor Lorne was the victim of his own nervous apprehension." Titheredge's usually dry tones were filled with contrition. "I only wish then that we had gone out and investigated, but I was afraid that we would awaken the rest of the family and there would be another scene.

"I did hear the gnawing, grating sound very distinctly, and I was perfectly sincere when I told Lorne that I thought it must be caused by rats or mice in the walls. Lorne said that he could have sworn it sounded louder than any rat, but I paid no attention. Now, looking back, I realize that it might well have been a saw cutting through the solid oak of the top step of the stairs."

"You haven't had a chance to examine it yet yourself, Mr. Titheredge?"

"No, but it won't be touched until we get back there—". The attorney halted as a sudden memory gripped him. "By George, I'm not so sure of that, after all! We had better hurry."

Sergeant Odell rose. As they made their way from the building he gave more than one keen side-long glance at his companion.

It was not until they were speeding uptown in the taxi, however, that Titheredge mentioned the thought which had come to him.

"Sergeant, as I was leaving the house this morning to

run down here I came upon two workmen arguing with the butler in the hall. They said that someone had telephoned to the shop *yesterday* to have them come and rehang a large picture. Yesterday, mind you, and the portrait only fell last night! If you can find out who telephoned from the house—"

"Did they say that the call had come from the house itself, Mr. Titheredge?" the detective interposed quietly.

"Well, no; now that I think of it they didn't say from where it was sent, but I inferred—"

"I think we'll go to the shop first." Again the detective interrupted him. "That is, if you know what shop sent them out?"

"Yes. It is Kenny's, on Eighth Avenue." The attorney gave the address to the chauffeur. "If a similar order has been given concerning the broken stair and carried out before we get there, we'll just rip it apart again."

"Mr. Titheredge." The detective had evidently been following a train of thought of his own. "You said that Mr. Lorne wanted to 'phone to Headquarters last night but you dissuaded him?"

"Yes. Even before the portrait fell he said that he felt like going to the authorities. He had nothing but his vague, superstitious fears to back up his story, which then seemed fantastic to me beyond belief. But after that attempt on Gene's life I had all I could do to compel him to wait until I could get in touch with you."

"And where did this discussion take place?"

"Right there in the library in front of the fallen picture."

"With the door open, so that anyone who chose to listen could hear all that was said?"

"Why, yes." The attorney looked somewhat taken aback. "What are you driving at, Sergeant?"

"The necessity for the stairs being rendered almost fatally dangerous in the night. It was a risk, you know, with you two talking in that room right at hand."

"But I don't see"—Titheredge stammered. "I thought it was done to cause the death of the first member of the family who attempted to descend, regardless of which one it might be."

Odell shook his head, and his tone was very grave.

"Had anyone been listening in the hall outside the library last night and heard your decision to take your story to the police this morning, they would naturally suppose that you would rise earlier than the rest of the family, and that you and Mr. Lorne would descend the stairs together; wouldn't they?"

"Good heavens!" the attorney exclaimed. "That never occurred to me. It was a mad, desperate attempt, then, to kill us in order to prevent our notifying you!"

"Not necessarily to kill you, but to injure you and delay our receipt of your message at least until the portrait had been rehung and the only bit of real evidence which you seem to possess—the cut wires—removed." Odell laughed. "Of course, I may be dead wrong, and it isn't my usual method to form conclusions before I've even gone over the ground, and then expatiate on them; but that's the way it looks to me now. Is this your shop?"

The taxi had stopped before a store the signboard of which read: "William Kenny, Carpentering, Plastering and Interior Decorating." It appeared to be a small place of an inferior sort.

"Odd that anyone interested in the rehanging of that portrait should not have called on some picture dealer for the service," Odell remarked to the attorney as they left the cab and crossed the sidewalk. "It doesn't seem as though a place of this kind could supply men fitted for the job."

"Not if the one who telephoned was ignorant of such things," Titheredge responded.

Again the detective favored him with a swift side glance, but vouchsafed no further comment.

William Kenny proved to be a tall, gaunt man who gesticulated loose-jointedly as he talked; and he appeared quite willing to talk at any length.

"About that picter-hangin' business." He rubbed one outstanding ear reflectively. "I did think it was funny when my men come back awhile ago an' told me as how the butler over there had tried to tell them there was a mistake; there wasn't, because I got the call myself over the 'phone yesterday."

"At what time?" asked Odell.

"Oh, 'long about three, some'eres. I didn't take partic'ler notice." Kenny rested one long arm upon the counter and regarded his inquisitors shrewdly. "Say, nothin' wrong about that business, was they?"

"Not a thing in the world, except that conflicting orders were given, and we cannot understand it," Odell replied in hasty reassurance. "Just what was the order that was placed with you?"

"To have two men sent over to the Meade house on Madison Avenue at seven-thirty sharp this morning to hang a heavy picture; they was to bring along iron staples and the strongest grade of steel wire. Now, we don't handle

much of that kind of work, but I wasn't goin' to lose a chance at that swell trade, so I said 'all right'; an' that's all there is to it."

"So you'd never done any work for them before?"

"Nope. Dunno how they come to call me in the first place, but I ain't kickin' at that."

"Was the voice that talked to you over the telephone a man's or a woman's?" Odell inquired casually with a glance toward the door as if preparing to depart.

"Couldn't tell; it might have been either." Kenny straightened himself. "It was gruff-like, and rasping, but not real deep. Say," he added with a touch of anxiety, "that order ain't canceled, is it? The boys was to go back just after the noon hour and do the job."

"Oh, no. Send them along and it will be all right." The detective turned toward the door; and Titheredge, who had taken no part in the questioning, followed, marveling that the other had left the most important point untouched upon.

With his hand on the doorknob, however, Odell turned once more.

"Oh, by the way, that call came directly from the Meade house, didn't it?"

"Dunno!" Kenny looked his surprise. "It was a city call, all right, you could tell that from the way the voice come over the wire, but it might have been from anywhere's around town."

"Well, it sure is funny about those conflicting orders." The detective shook his head in a puzzled manner. "Too bad you can't fix the time the call came in to you any closer, Mr. Kenny."

"Hold on! Maybe I can." The head of the establish-

ment paused in what was evidently for him a vast mental effort. "It was about three—no, it was after; it was just twenty-five minutes past! I remember because I'd sent Dooley over to kalsomine some ceilings on Forty-fourth Street, an' he'd ought to've been back here by two-thirty at most. I'm payin' the boys by the time; an' he must have loafed on his job, for he never got back until twenty-five past three. I'd just started in to bawl him out when the 'phone rang."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Kenny. We've told the other people who claim to have been sent for that there was nothing doing; you had the job. Good morning."

In the taxi once more cutting across town Barry Odell remarked:

"The residence of Mr. Lorne and his stepchildren is known as the Meade house, then. It must have belonged to his wife's people."

"Yes, for generations. She and this spinster sister who has survived her each owned a half interest in it. When she married Halsey Chalmers he built a house for her up on Fifth Avenue; but after his death she sold it, and she and her family, including Miss Meade of course, came back to live in the old home. Richard Lorne could never persuade her to leave it." Titheredge paused and added: "It isn't one of these ornate, miniature palaces they are building nowadays, you know; just a solid, substantial old brownstone mansion, and rather a landmark in its way."

"You spoke of this Eugene who had the narrow escape last night, and of the youngest son who was a hunchback, and the girls," Odell observed. "The daughters are both grown up?"

"Christine, who was named after her mother, is twenty-two, and Nan is just twenty."

"Any love affairs?"

The attorney hesitated.

"I believe there is a sort of bread-and-butter flirtation going on between Nan and a good-looking boy whose people have the house on the avenue next door. The Meade house is on the corner. Tad Traymore—his father is old Thaddeus Traymore of the Palladium Trust Company—is just out of the university and starting to read law, so there isn't much chance of the affair assuming the status of an engagement now."

"And the other daughter?"

A full minute passed before Titheredge replied.

"That is another source of worry to Lorne. She has recently become quite infatuated with a man much older than herself named Drew. His antecedents are irreproachable and he is still received in the best society, but his past —well, it hasn't been one that would render him suitable as a husband for a girl like Christine."

"Not Farley Drew who was named in the Gael divorce case?" The detective's tone had sharpened slightly.

Titheredge nodded.

"That's the chap. His people left him fairly well off; but he squandered all he had long ago, and it is Christine's money that he is after, of course, although she is a beautiful girl. Drew is not the sort of man to be attracted by unsophistication."

"I'll tell the world that!" Odell commented with emphasis. "He may be received by the best society, but he'll be received by us, too, down at Headquarters if he doesn't watch

his step. We haven't got anything on him yet, you understand, Mr. Titheredge, but he's been under suspicion in more than one shady transaction. Always travels around with men much younger than himself, doesn't he?"

The attorney's lips set in a stiff line.

"Mere boys with wealth, gilded youth, who want to see life, and he shows them a certain side of it while their money lasts."

The detective whistled softly.

"I thought as much," he said. "So that's how he gained an introduction into Mr. Lorne's household?"

"Yes. I'm giving you a lot of inside information, Sergeant, which perhaps in justice to my clients I should not disclose; but in a case like this where I cannot tell what may be of use to you I think it best to put you in possession of whatever facts I know concerning every member of the family."

"It is just saving time and trouble for me, Mr. Titheredge, for I would find out for myself anyway," Odell assured him. "Which of the boys was it who brought Drew to the house; Julian or Eugene?"

There was another pause longer than before and then the attorney replied slowly:

"It was Eugene."

CHAPTER IV

BARRY ODELL TAKES HOLD

THERE was time for no further talk, for the taxi drew up at that moment before the house. The doctor's sedan was just rolling away; and in answer to Titheredge's ring the housemaid, a plump young woman with cap askew, admitted them.

"Is Peters busy, Jane?" asked the attorney as he handed her his hat and stick.

"No, sir. We can't find Peters anywhere, though we've been looking this half hour. Miss Meade didn't send him on no errand, and we don't know what to think of it."

"He'll probably turn up shortly," Titheredge observed with a significant glance at the detective. "Has Mr. Lorne been taken upstairs yet?"

"No, sir. He refuses to go; and Miss Meade, she don't know what to do! There, he's calling now, sir!"

And indeed an irascible but reassuringly strong voice was reverberating through the hall from the direction of the library.

"Sam! Is that you? Did you get him? Sa-am!"

"Come this way, Sergeant." The attorney led the way to the library, where Richard Lorne still lay upon the couch. His clothing had been changed for a dressing-gown with one sleeve cut out, and the arm was neatly bandaged in a

sling; and although he was pale, his mouth was set in determined lines beneath the stubby gray mustache.

Nan was seated beside him, and Gene stood over by the window nervously fingering the shade-cord; but the other members of the family were not present.

As Titheredge performed the introductions Nan rose, her eyes darkening.

"A detective?" she asked quietly, but her breast rose and fell with spasmodic rapidity. "Father, what does this mean?"

"It means, my dear," Titheredge answered suavely before Lorne could speak, "that your father and I have talked things over, and he has told me the possibly imaginary but nevertheless torturing strain you have all been under since your brother's death. He shared with you the feeling that perhaps there was something more than coincidence in the two sorrows which have come into your life so closely upon the heels of each other. You know how that portrait fell last night, almost killing Gene, and what a narrow escape your father himself had this morning when the top step of the stairs collapsed and precipitated him to the bottom.

"Of course, these may all be mere coincidences; but we want to be sure of it to allay all your fears, and so we have called in this young man to make the fullest investigation. He will question everyone, and—you listen to this, too, Gene—you must be absolutely frank with him. Remember, there must be no lying, no subterfuge."

"My God!" Gene came forward. "I knew I was right! I knew that picture was meant to fall upon me and crush me! And the others—my mother and Julian—"

"Steady there, Gene," the attorney warned. "We don't

know but that all that has occurred so far has been sheer accident."

"Well, I'm glad you are going to find out!" Gene held out his hand frankly to the detective. "You can count on me, Mr. Odell."

"Thank you, Mr. Chalmers. I shall want to have a little conference with your father and Mr. Titheredge here, but I'll look you up later."

Gene took the hint and sauntered out of the library; and Nan prepared to follow him, but Odell stopped her.

"May I ask, Miss Chalmers, whether or not the broken stair has been mended yet?"

"No, Mr. Odell. Aunt Effie wanted to have it attended to, but she was afraid the hammering would disturb father. She hates to have anything upset around the house."

"Then if you will sit here with your father for a few minutes Mr. Titheredge and I will go and inspect it."

Gene was nowhere to be seen when the attorney and Odell reëntered the hall, and they mounted the stairs to the topmost step, covered with a crimson-velvet runner. The detective knelt on the step just below and felt over the smooth pile of the carpet's surface.

"You see," he said rapidly in a lowered tone to his companion, "the tread of the step neither collapsed in the middle, nor split, nor caved in at either end; it simply turned forward over the face as if on a pivot as soon as Mr. Lorne's weight was placed upon it, pitching him headlong down."

"The carpet appears to be loose, doesn't it?" Titheredge himself bent and gave it a tug; and the strip of crimson velvet came away in his hands from beneath the edge of

the rug which covered the upper hall, while tiny tacks with flat brass heads flew in every direction.

"Thumbtacks," Odell vouchsafed. "When the person who executed this little maneuver replaced the carpet he didn't dare hammer, with you and Mr. Lorne in that room so near by; so he pressed the thumbtacks in as a temporary hold, and left a good margin of the extra carpet that had been turned under loose, too, so as to give extra room for the tread to turn over without pulling out the tacks."

He folded the runner back across his knees; and the attorney uttered a sharp exclamation, as instantly silenced. A good four inches of the riser or faceboard had been sawed away at the top where it had formerly supported the tread; and the tread itself was cut through from wainscoting and balustrade at either end.

"When Mr. Lorne put his weight upon the step it cracked across at the line where it is level with the hall-flooring, and its outer edge crashed down until it rested on the lowered top of the face," the detective explained. "It had much the same effect as if one stepped from the center to the uptilted end of a see-saw. Do you observe something else, Mr. Titheredge?"

"Can't say that I do," the other replied, regarding thoughtfully the scraps of sawdust which the turned-back carpet revealed. "Whoever the fellow was—"

He halted abruptly as Miss Meade appeared from her room down the hall and came quickly toward them. Light as her footfalls were, the keen ears of the detective caught them; and in an instant he had turned up the strip of carpet once more and thrust its end hastily beneath the edge of the rug.

"Oh, Mr. Titheredge, I am so glad you have returned." She spoke with evident anxiety as she approached. "I hope you will be able to persuade Richard to let us get him into bed and nurse him. Did they tell you that besides his arm two ribs are fractured? He refuses absolutely—"

She, too, paused at sight of the strange young man kneeling upon the stairs, and her eyes turned inquiringly toward the attorney.

"Miss Meade," Titheredge's tone was very grave. "Will you permit me to present Sergeant Odell of the police department?"

She bowed with old-fashioned courtesy as the young man rose, but her face quivered slightly.

"I—I do not understand!" she said. "A policeman in this house! But why, Mr. Titheredge, why?"

"Because there have been things going on in this house that both Richard and the children desire to have investigated." The attorney spoke very gently. "We did not consult you at first because we did not want to distress you, but no time could be lost this morning. When the portrait—"

"Mr. Titheredge means," Odell interrupted hastily, "that the deaths of Mrs. Lorne and her son, taken in conjunction with the fall of the picture last night when your nephew was only saved by a miracle, and the broken stair this morning, which almost cost Mr. Lorne his life, may not have been accidents after all; and I have been engaged to investigate the latter two occurrences."

"But this is terrible!" Miss Meade cried in a low tone as if at a sacrilege. "My poor sister's death and Julian's were by the will of God! The—the others have been

troubled by foolish, nervous fears but my faith is strong. The fall of that picture was an unfortunate accident; and I blame myself for Eugene's danger, because he sat there at my suggestion to reply to some correspondence. As to the stairs giving way this morning, that must have been an accident too; the house is old, our home for generations back—"

Her voice died away as the detective in answer turned back the carpet once more and silently exposed the damage which had been deliberately wrought.

Miss Meade caught her breath sharply, and her thin, delicate hands came together in a convulsive clasp.

"Oh, what does it mean? Surely none of the boys would attempt to play a wicked practical joke at such a time as this!"

"This was not intended for a joke, Miss Meade." Odell's matter-of-fact tone seemed to make her shrink within herself. "It was done with the deliberate purpose of injury to some member of this household. The portrait fell last night because the heavy steel wires which helped to hold it in its place had been hacked apart. I am sorry to add to your distress, but the truth must be faced; someone is trying to murder you all!"

"Murder!" Her pale lips barely formed the word. "I —I cannot believe it! There must be some hideous mistake. Why, we haven't an enemy in the world!"

She swayed and would have fallen but that Titheredge sprang forward and caught her.

"You had better go back to your own room and rest, Miss Meade. I'll see that Dick is made comfortable, and you will need all your strength for what I am afraid lies

before you," he said. "Sergeant Odell may want to see you later on to ask you for some information, but he will not disturb you if it is not absolutely necessary."

He led her down the hall to her own room, closed the door, and came back to the stair's head to find the detective carefully replacing the thumbtacks.

"That will do, I think," the latter observed. "Now, let us go down and have a look at that picture."

They descended again to the library. As they entered Nan rose, kissed her father on the forehead softly, and went from the room.

"You've been examining the stairs?" Richard Lorne asked, panting from the knife-thrusts of pain which darted through his hurt ribs at each breath.

"Yes, Dick. They were sawed through, just as we imagined," Titheredge replied. "If you won't be taken to bed just yet, lie still and don't try to talk; I'll keep you informed of everything that goes on. I suppose you know that Peters has disappeared?"

Lorne nodded.

"We'll make short work of him if he has had a hand in what has been going on," the attorney promised grimly. "I caught him in two direct lies this morning before I left the house, but I attributed them to the fact that the man was addled from fright. Let me see; you've had him three years, haven't you?"

"Four," came raspingly from the couch.

"Ah, yes, I remember. Ever have any reason to distrust him?"

"Never. What's that chap doing?"

Lorne had craned his neck as far as his painful position

would allow, and Titheredge followed his gaze. Sergeant Odell, with a pair of powerful wire-clippers in his hands, was bending over the portrait as it lay face down over the desk.

"Just removing these severed strands of the cable, so that they may be examined under a glass, Mr. Lorne," the detective replied for himself. "There isn't the least doubt that they were deliberately cut; but I want to find out if I can what sort of instrument was used. One thing is certain; whoever did this trick and the one upstairs was of tremendous strength. The tread and face of that step were cut with long, slow sweeps of a heavy saw, not haggled with a small, light one; and the portrait here must have been pried loose from the wall with some powerful lever before the supporting wires could be cut, for no clipper such as this could have reached them. If you will take my advice, Mr. Lorne, you will permit us to assist you to bed now; the shock which you have received, together with your injuries, will make it impossible for me to question you now."

"To-morrow?" Lorne asked eagerly. "Want to get at the bottom—"

"Yes, I know," Odell nodded encouragingly. "You can leave everything in our hands. We'll get you upstairs now with as little pain to you as possible."

"Hadn't we better have young Mr. Chalmers's help?" asked Titheredge. "We will have to carry him around to the servants' staircase, you know, and we must not jar him any more than is necessary."

The detective assented and Titheredge rang the bell, but no one appeared.

"I'll go and look for him myself," the latter remarked, but Odell stopped him.

"I should prefer to do that, Mr. Titheredge. Will you instead go to the servants' quarters and see if any more of them have decamped?" He turned again to the couch. "Mr. Lorne, which is Mr. Chalmers's room?"

"The one on the left, third floor, rear," panted the sick man. "Julian's was the room just in front of it."

"Do they connect?" The attorney had already gone on his errand, and Odell paused in the doorway.

"Yes, by the bath and dressing-rooms between."

The detective glanced into the drawing- and dining-rooms and then mounted the main staircase, avoiding the broken top step. He was proceeding along the hall to the second flight leading to the third floor when from one of the rooms behind him a burst of laughter came; impish, sarcastic laughter utterly lacking in mirth.

It seemed such a strange, incongruous thing in the silence of that house that Odell paused; and then in a thin, high, whining voice came the words:

"The police? That would be like old Sam, wouldn't it? As well send a village fire-company to put out Vesuvius. We'll go, one after the other; you'll see!"

From whose lips could that voice have issued? Odell recalled the two members of the family whom he had not as yet encountered; the oldest daughter and the youngest son. The hunchback. It must be he. Odell waited.

There came a low murmur in an unmistakable feminine tone, and then the high querulous one again.

"My dear aunt, where is the disgrace to the family in

having a policeman cross our sacred portals? They are quite as respectable as murderers, though scarcely as efficient. Now, if I were the next on the list of our domestic Dionysius and the sword were suspended over my head, I should reach up and snap the hair. I can afford to laugh."

"Not you! Rannie, my darling, never you!"

The sharp cry was almost a wail, but it held such a wealth of infinite love and devotion that the listening detective could hardly credit the fact that it was the quiet, self-contained, little Miss Meade who uttered it. That it was ungratefully received was evident from the indistinct but churlish grumble which followed; and then there was silence.

Odell continued on his way upstairs with a new fact to add to the family data with which the attorney had supplied him. The cripple was evidently his aunt's favorite; the spinster had taken to her heart the one maimed member of the family in preference to all the rest.

When he reached the third floor Odell was conscious of an acrid odor on the air, which seemed to come from the rear on the left, the room which Lorne had told him was occupied by Gene. He bent and looked quickly through the keyhole, but the turned key obstructed his view. The smoky, acrid odor was stronger now. Gene had lost no time after encountering the detective in locking himself in his room and burning certain papers.

It was natural, perhaps, that the young man should have private letters which he would not care to have seen by the prying eyes of a stranger; yet coupling his discovery with Titheredge's statement of the previous association with the

notorious Farley Drew, Odell decided to look into the matter without delay.

He rapped smartly on the door, to hear an astonished and perturbed "Hello?" from within, followed by:

"Be with you in a second."

Then came the subdued clatter of heavy glassware, a pause, the scratching of a match, and finally footsteps. Gene, puffing furiously at a pipe, opened the door.

"Oh, I say, I didn't know it was you, Sergeant. Come in; hope you don't mind my pipe. Anything I can do for you?" He was plainly flustered.

Odell took in the room in one swift, comprehensive glance: the bed had not yet been made, and the chifferobe was open, its trays and drawers in disorder, but the desk was closed. The top of the cut-glass tobacco-jar upon it was open, and the tobacco strewn all about it bore evidence of the haste with which the pipe had been filled. In the open grate was a little heap of gray, flaky ashes from which a thin spiral of smoke still wound its way; and the detective saw to his satisfaction that a few pieces of hastily torn paper were scattered unburned upon the hearth.

"I came to ask you if you would help Mr. Titheredge and myself carry your father to his room." His eyes came casually back to the young man's flushed face. "There is no hurry, however. I believe this room was occupied by your late brother? I should like to see just where his death took place. Can you show me, Mr. Chalmers?" He had indicated the front room by a gesture.

Gene hesitated.

"Both doors are locked and my father has the keys," he said at last; and there was an undercurrent of sullen

defiance in his changed tone as though he anticipated the next question.

"Will you go and ask him for them, please?"

"But—but no one has entered that room since the funeral," Gene stammered. "I don't think father would like it, Sergeant; and nothing in there could have any possible bearing on your investigation."

"Mr. Chalmers, may I remind you that that is not for you to decide? Will you get those keys at once!" The last sentence was not a query but a command, and each word increased in emphatic dominance. Gene gave one fleeting, desperate glance toward his desk—in the lock of which the key still remained—and fled downstairs.

Unless the young man had temporarily lost his head and burned his papers without discrimination as they came to his hand, those already destroyed must have been the most important; and locking the door in his turn, Odell went quickly to the grate and pocketed every unburned scrap that remained.

Then he moved as swiftly to the desk and opened it. A disordered heap of letters met his eye; most of them evidently bills, from the tradesmen's names in the upper right hand corner. Odell had seized a handful at random and was about to shut the desk when he noticed that the small center drawer was not quite closed. Pulling it open hastily he discovered a small notebook and a few letters in an odd but unmistakably masculine hand.

He cleared the drawer at one sweep, closed the desk, and dropping his findings from it into the coat-pocket on his left side, he drew from the other two or three fragments of the paper which he had salvaged from the grate.

One of them bore in a temperamental, feminine hand only three letters of a word, but they were illuminating: "lov." Odell smiled as he replaced it in his pocket; but his expression changed when he glanced at the others. The writing upon them was all in a bold, dashing, masculine hand, and two of the scraps fitted together read: "whole family in hell before."

Odell frowned thoughtfully and drew from his left coat-pocket one of the letters which he had taken from the center drawer in the desk. It was in the same strongly accentuated writing, and read without preamble:

"Where do you think you get off, Gene? You are in too deep to back out now, as I meant you should be. Your mother's went through without a hitch and the next one will if you only keep your nerve. It's got to be done by the sixth or you know where the first one will send you. I mean business, my boy.

"FARLEY DREW."

Barry Odell folded the letter slowly and replaced it in its envelope. To-day was the fourteenth, and Julian Chalmers had come to his death just eight days before—on the sixth!

CHAPTER V

"I WISH IT HAD BEEN YOU"

ODELL put the letter back into his pocket and striding across the room unlocked the door and flung it wide. He was only just in time; for he could hear hurried footsteps bounding up the stairs, and in another moment Gene's head appeared above the landing.

Its owner peered suspiciously first toward his desk and then at the grate; but nothing seemed amiss, and the police sergeant was standing before him with his hand outstretched authoritatively.

Silently Gene surrendered the keys.

"Thanks." The detective made no move toward the other room. "Mr. Chalmers, how long have you known Farley Drew?"

The question came so abruptly that Gene shot the inquirer a startled glance, which then strayed once more uncontrollably to the desk, while a deep flush came again into his cheeks.

"What has Mr. Drew to do with the matter you have under investigation?"

"That does not reply to my question, Mr. Chalmers." From taking part in many far more strenuous examinations Odell well knew the value of the repetition of a name.

Gene flung himself into a chair; and for a moment there

was silence while he puffed at his pipe. At length he looked up and met the detective's gaze.

"See here, Sergeant, I told you downstairs that you could count on me, and I want this d—n mystery cleared up as much as the rest do; more, since my own life was attempted last night! But I don't like to discuss my private affairs, and I won't have my friends dragged in. Unless you have been prying into my letters while I was out of the room, I suppose our attorney must have been unearthing the family skeletons and black sheep and all that sort of thing for your benefit. However, I've no reason for concealing my friendship for Mr. Drew. I met him about four years ago."

"Where?"

Gene had recovered his nonchalance and waved lazily toward a chair.

"I foresee that this interview is apt to be a protracted one." He knocked the ashes from his pipe into the hearth. "I met him at a private gambling club over Morey's, which I understand your enterprising organization has since closed up."

"With or through whom did you meet him, Mr. Chalmers?"

"I was with several friends of mine whose names I cannot recall at the moment and was presented to Mr. Drew by an acquaintance named Stone."

"Philip Stone the embezzler?" Odell's smooth, calm, level tones remained the same; but Gene stirred in his chair.

"I did not know he had attained such prominence as to be known as 'the' anything," he protested with a shrug.

"I believe he did get in some sort of trouble later with a trust company or bank or something, but as I told you he was a mere acquaintance; I had been introduced to him in a restaurant only a night or two before."

"You were then about twenty, I think, Mr. Chalmers?"

"I was. I must ask you again what all this has to do with your investigation." Gene's eyes began to glow sullenly. "May I suggest that you are wasting valuable time?"

"Mr. Chalmers, that is my affair. To return to your friend Farley Drew; when did you first bring him to your home and introduce him to your sisters?"

A touch of sternness had crept into the detective's tone; and the glow in the eyes of the young man changed to a furtive glint.

"I say, you leave my sisters out of this!" He half rose from his chair. "I'll tell you anything you want to know about myself, but I won't discuss them with you."

"That does not answer my question, Mr. Chalmers; and I doubt if your solicitude is as much for your sisters as for yourself." Odell eyed the squirming young man narrowly. "I represent the law, and there will be a lot more of our men here presently. It won't get you anywhere to try to oppose me."

"I have no reason for opposing you, Sergeant," Gene responded hastily. "It sort of gets my goat, though, to be hammered at like this when, by Jove, I'm the injured party. I introduced Farley Drew to my people about a year ago."

"And did you present him to your brother at the same time?"

"To Julian? Yes." He tried to reply with the old

sangfroid; but his chin trembled, and he put up his hand to mask it.

"Your brother then became one of his associates?"

"One of his friends," Gene remarked stiffly.

"Did that in any way affect your friendship with Drew, Mr. Chalmers?"

"Of course not; why should it? Julian and I traveled as a rule in different crowds, but we had many mutual friends, and—and Mr. Drew was one of them."

"And did you and your brother get on well together, Mr. Chalmers? You will have to pardon this question, but others will answer it if you refuse." Odell paused and repeated: "How did you and your brother get on together?"

"About as well as any brothers do, I fancy." Gene's gaze wandered to the littered top of his dressing-table, but as if conscious of the detective's eyes upon him he quickly averted it. "We had a healthy old row now and then, but —but we always patched it up. I'd rather not talk about it now, if you don't mind, Sergeant. It's only a week, you know—"

Odell rose.

"Of course. We will go down now and move your father to his room."

"But"—Gene rose also and stared in surprise at the detective—"I thought you wanted to go through Julian's room."

"That will keep." Odell smiled slightly. "Come."

Gene hesitated; but the other so obviously waited for him that he had no choice, and together they descended to the library.

When the injured man had been ensconced in bed and

made as comfortable as possible Titheredge announced that he must go to his office. Gene had taken the first opportunity to retire once more to his room; and the detective went down alone to the hall, where he came upon Miss Meade in the drawing-room doorway.

"You are feeling better?" he asked courteously. "I am sorry that my presence here startled you so this morning."

"I am glad that you are here," she replied. "I have been waiting until you had finished with my brother-in-law, for I want to talk to you; that is, if you can spare the time just now."

She added the last few words in a deprecating manner, which he realized must be an habitual one with her, as if all her life she had been kept in the background, set aside. She seemed not a looker-on but a mere shadow of those of stronger personality about her.

"I have been anxious for this opportunity myself, Miss Meade," he assured her. "I want to know a great many things which only you can tell me, if you feel strong enough. It will be painful to you, I am afraid, for I must touch on your double sorrow of the last month, but my only motive is to discover the truth."

"Come in and be seated, please." She led the way into the drawing-room and motioned toward a chair. "Tell me first of all, Sergeant Odell, is it true that attempts were actually made upon the lives of my nephew and my brother-in-law? I—I saw where the stairs had been deliberately cut through, of course, and yet I cannot seem to realize it. It is the total absence of motive which makes it all seem like some frightful dream."

"Nevertheless it is stern reality, Miss Meade."

Her face quivered, and she bowed her head for a moment.

"You spoke of touching upon my grief. Does that mean that you think my sister and her oldest son—that they could have been killed? Their deaths were so plainly the result of what worldly people call accident that I believed our trial was the Lord's will, and was endeavoring to resign myself to it, although no one will ever know what my sister was to me. Is there a possibility that their deaths were the result of some evil human design?"

"That is what I must determine." Odell drew his chair closer. "When did Mrs. Lorne run the needle into her finger?"

"A little over five weeks ago, some time during the first part of August."

"Did it occur here in this house? Was anyone present at the time?"

"Yes, I was." Miss Meade shuddered. "If I had only known what it was to bring about! But she thought nothing of it at the time and wouldn't even trouble to use the witch hazel which I brought from my bathroom. Christine was always a—a rather dominant person and disliked advice."

Her voice trailed off vaguely, and Odell gently urged her on.

"Will you tell me about it, please, every detail you remember?"

"I will try, Sergeant Odell; but you must forgive me if I give you rather a—a rambling account. I am not accustomed to telling things; I usually listen."

While she paused it came to Odell that her last sentence epitomized what her years must have brought her. He was

not given to sentimentalizing over old maids, but he found himself all at once tremendously interested in this middle-aged spinster, colorless and negative as she was.

"In the first place you must understand that we were utterly unlike, my sister and I. Perhaps that was why we were so devoted to each other. I cannot describe her, but she was beautiful, brilliant, self-assertive; while I have always been as you see me now." Her voice trembled at first but steadied as she went on. "She loved youth and could not endure the thought of coming age. That is why we have all stayed in town this summer; she was taking a special beauty treatment which required some weeks for its completion. I was the only one who knew this. We told the rest of the family that it was ill-health and she must remain in the city for electrical treatments. You can see how close we were to each other, Sergeant Odell. There is a little dressing-room off her bedroom—I will show it to you presently—which she had furnished as a sort of boudoir; and we sat there for hours together, I mending and she embroidering. Christine was always fond of bright colors."

Miss Meade's voice died away in retrospection, but she recovered herself and continued:

"Her embroidery-basket was never taken out of that room, and on the morning when—when it happened we had been chatting and working for about an hour when suddenly she uttered a sharp exclamation and dropped the embroidery-frame in her lap. I supposed she had merely become impatient, and I did not even look up until she spoke. 'Oh, I've stuck my finger!' I can almost hear her say it now! As I told you, I got the witch hazel for her; but

she wouldn't use it, and the incident passed. The next day her finger was painful and inflamed; but she would not hear of a doctor until three days later, when her whole hand and arm commenced to swell.

"There—there isn't very much more to tell." Her voice faltered and then went on: "The day after the doctor was called in he sent for a specialist; then another, and a third, but it was no use; she was dead in ten days."

"Who attended her, Miss Meade?" Odell spoke quickly.

"Our family physician, Doctor Adams, who came to Richard this morning. He called in Doctor Kelland and Doctor Day and finally Doctor McCutchen. Then there were the two nurses, of course, Miss Risby and Miss Brown; but I scarcely left her bedside for an hour until the end."

"Miss Meade, who has access to the boudoir?"

"Why, all the household. Richard and the children were in and out constantly, and Jane every day to dust. And of course Gerda."

"Who is Gerda?"

"The lady's maid. She served both my sister and Cissie, the younger Christine."

"And not Miss Nan nor you?"

Miss Meade looked down.

"I always dress so simply that I have no need of a maid, and Nan is too independent to be annoyed with one. Would you—would you care to interview Gerda later?"

"I would, Miss Meade; but I want to know now what you can tell me of the second death, that of your nephew."

"It was—horrible!" She closed her eyes for a moment. "Richard can tell you more about that than I can when he

is better, for he and Gene were the first to see him after Peters came rushing down. I—I only caught one glimpse before they took me away; and the girls weren't allowed to go in at all."

"How did it occur?" the detective asked patiently. "Please try to tell me all you know of it. Was your nephew in good health and spirits—aside from his natural grief for his mother, I mean?"

For the first time Miss Meade hesitated.

"Well, no," she admitted at length. "He adored my sister, of course; and he felt her death deeply. He had been in a nervous, excitable condition for months; and the shock of losing her increased his nervousness. He started violently at the sound of an unexpected voice or the abrupt closing of a door; and he had been losing weight rapidly. I—I think he had had some trouble over money matters with his stepfather, but Mr. Lorne must tell you about that; I really try to keep out of family affairs as much as possible.

"Last Wednesday—a week ago yesterday—he did not come down for breakfast, nor ring for any to be brought up to him. Cissie had hers in bed, I remember; and Randall—my youngest nephew, who is an invalid—was not well enough to come down; but Mr. Lorne, Nan, and myself were in the dining-room. I was pouring the coffee when Gene appeared; and his stepfather asked him if Julian were up. He said that he didn't think so, he had not heard him moving about. Mr. Lorne was annoyed, because Julian had an appointment to go downtown with him that morning, and finally he sent Peters up to call him."

Miss Meade paused; and Odell, who had watched her closely throughout her narration, marveled. Her thin

hands were clasped tightly in her lap; but her voice was steady and quietly modulated, and her high-bred face as expressionless as a mask. What unknown reservoirs of strength and self-control lay behind that meek exterior! And this was the woman whom he had thought a spineless, colorless personality!

"We continued our meal as Peters went upstairs, when after quite an interval—it must have been five minutes at least—we heard a most dreadful cry, which brought us all to our feet. It was Peters and he came scrambling and stumbling downstairs screaming out with every breath in that frightful hoarse way. When he reached the dining-room door here he clung to it as if to keep from falling, and his face was the color of gray blotting-paper. 'For God's sake, go up, sir!' he said to Mr. Lorne. 'For God's sake, go up!'

"That was all they could get out of him, and Richard rushed upstairs with Gene after him. Nan ran over to Peters and commenced to shake him, but he would only groan; and I passed them and hurried upstairs myself. When I reached Julian's room Gene was lying face downward across the bed rolling from side to side and crying terribly, and Richard was standing in the doorway leading to the bathroom staring down at something which lay at his feet.

"I went to him, and there lay our poor Julian! I simply cannot tell you, Sergeant Odell! It seemed as if a wave of blood had engulfed him and then ebbed. It was a—a shambles! I covered my face with my hands and tottered back; and then Richard came to himself and led me away. And they tell me it was such a tiny wound in his throat,

just a fractional slip of the razor. The least unexpected noise might have been the innocent cause. Oh, he should not have attempted to shave himself while he was so nervous!"

Her hands fluttered for a moment and then gripped the arms of her chair; and the detective saw her face twitch once and settle again into its masklike fixity.

"What noise could there have been?" Odell asked. "Was anyone else on the third floor at that time?"

"No. Nan has the front room directly opposite, but she is the earliest riser of us all; the other two are guest-chambers and were unoccupied. There are always noises about an old house like this, though. Poor Julian might have heard the banging of an outside shutter from the rear, or one of the doors might have closed; there was quite a high wind that morning as I recall it, and all the windows were open. There can be no other way to account for it, Sergeant Odell. No one could have gotten into the house; and who—who would have wanted his life?"

"Who wanted to take his brother's last night, Miss Meade, or his stepfather's this morning?" Odell suggested quietly.

"That is what is torturing me," she exclaimed. "The sheer purposelessness of such an act. The boys have been a—a little wild, I am afraid; but they have done no harm, and no one could bear such terrible enmity against either of them. And Richard, Mr. Lorne, who could want to harm him? That is why it all seems like some hideous nightmare; that, and the sheer impossibility of anyone breaking into the house or—or knowing that someone of the family was going to sit beneath the portrait."

She broke off as a light but determined step came along the hall from the direction of the servants' staircase. Odell, too, glanced curiously out through the open drawing-room door just as a tiny, fairy-like figure with masses of golden hair beneath a small black hat walked quickly past and toward the entrance door.

"Cissie!" Miss Meade rose and slipped out into the hall. "Cissie, where are you going?"

"Away! Anywhere!" A girlish treble as clear and cold as a mountain brook fell upon the detective's ears. "I told you all last night that I was going, and then we really didn't *know* anything, we only felt it. If you think I'm going to stay in this house a minute longer—"

"But, but my dear—"

"Oh, you needn't worry, Aunt Effie. I sha'n't go to any of our friends and tell them of the terrible things that are going on in the sacred Meade house. I wouldn't disgrace any of them by being on their hands when the notoriety starts; and I'm not going to stay here to be murdered either. I don't know about poor mamma and Jule, but I *do* know about father and what so nearly happened to Gene, and I don't intend to be the next one. You've had your way in spite of everything, but I won't live another day in the same house with a—"

To the listening detective it seemed that the clear voice was snuffed out like a flame; and then there came, low but startlingly distinct, in Miss Meade's usually colorless tones:

"Silence, Christine! I wish to heaven that it had been you!"

CHAPTER VI

BLOODY HANDS

BARRY ODELL crept to the drawing-room door and peered cautiously out into the hall. The pretty girl was struggling to free herself from her aunt, whose hand was clapped across her mouth and who held her in a firm clasp. Cissie's young virility, though, was more than a match for the frail, middle-aged woman, and Miss Meade all at once relaxed and stepped back.

"The young man whom Mr. Titheredge brought from police headquarters this morning is in the drawing-room now," she announced; and as Odell hastily drew back he caught the veiled warning in her tone. "I am sure that he will not permit you to go until he has had an opportunity to talk with you; and certainly you shall not leave this house without telling either your stepfather or me where you are going."

"Why, Aunt Effie!" The utter stupefaction in the girl's tones betrayed clearly the fact that her aunt's new-found assertiveness was unprecedented. "I shall go and come as I please! As for the police, what have I to do with them? I am amazed that you should attempt to dictate to me when even mother—"

"Oh, my dear, my dear," the spinster broke in, "it is

simply because your mother is no longer with us and your stepfather lying injured upstairs that I must try to make you listen. You shall not go!"

Odell heard a little scuffle, and the handle of the great front door turned violently with a dull clang of bronze. Then Miss Meade's voice rose desperately.

"Sergeant Odell!"

He strode out into the hall to find the pretty girl, now flushed and with her cold blue eyes snapping fire, standing half in and half outside the door, with her aunt's restraining hand upon her arm.

"This is the young man from Headquarters of whom I told you, Cissie. My oldest niece, Miss Chalmers."

Odell bowed, and then glanced sharply at the traveling-bag in the girl's hands.

"You were going away, Miss Chalmers?" he asked in well-simulated surprise. "I am very sorry, but that will not be permitted. No one must leave this house on any pretext whatever until they are authorized to do so."

Cissie's lip curled.

"Are you aware that the butler has already gone?" she asked in her turn. "Surely if the servants—"

"The butler if he does not return here of his own volition will be caught in the dragnet and brought in before nightfall," Odell interrupted her sternly. "He will be taken to Headquarters, questioned for hours, and finally locked up on suspicion if on no graver charge. You will be suitably protected here in your own home, Miss Chalmers, and here you must remain."

She tossed her head.

"By whose authority?"

"Mine." He spoke quietly; but there was that in his tone which had caused more than one defiant malefactor to "come across" without further demur, and Cissie dropped her eyes. "Allow me, please."

He took her bag from her unresisting hand, placed it on a carved chest which stood against the wall and turned to Miss Meade.

"Your telephone is in the library, is it not? I should like to use it for a moment. Are there any extensions?"

"Only one, and that is in my sister's room," Miss Meade replied. "If you turn it off and shut the library-door you will have absolute privacy."

"Thank you. Can you tell me Peters's home address?"

"He has no one except a married sister who lives over in New Dorp, Staten Island. I will get the address for you."

As she hurried away he turned once more to the girl.

"Miss Chalmers, I shall want a little talk with you in about an hour."

She bowed stiffly and turning upon her heel walked down the hall toward the back staircase, while he entered the library. Each interview with a different member of this strangely ill-assorted family made him feel that he was being carried deeper and deeper into a current of cross purposes, and the enigma of the angry young woman's interrupted speech recurred to him again and again in the minutes that followed.

How would she have completed that sentence if a warning hand had not been laid across her lips? What or who could it be with whom she would not live in the same

house another day? What had she meant in saying the aunt had had her way in spite of everything? Miss Meade did not look like the sort of person who could maintain her own way in the face of even the mildest opposition. And what had Miss Meade herself meant when she said, "I wish to heaven it had been you"?

It was unthinkable that she could have been referring to the recent deaths; no matter how sorely tried she was by her niece's willfulness such a thought would never have come to her. What, then, could have been the portent of that expressed wish?

He had turned the telephone-switch cutting off the extension and called Headquarters when Miss Meade glided into the room, laid a slip of paper on the stand beside him and went out again, closing the door behind her. Odell conferred with his captain and issued his preliminary orders, and then picking up the slip he glanced at the address and sent out a general alarm for the missing Peters.

This accomplished he emerged from the library to find Miss Meade waiting in the hall.

"How many servants do you employ?" he asked as he approached her.

"Four. Peters, Jane the housemaid, Gerda of whom I have already told you, and Marcelle the cook. Then there are the furnace man and the laundress, but they are not inmates of the house and know nothing of our affairs except the ordinary gossip below stairs," she replied. "Would you like to see any of them, Sergeant Odell?"

"Each of them in turn; but first will you show me Mrs. Lorne's boudoir?"

"Yes. We can reach it from the hall without disturbing Mr. Lorne. The boudoir connects their apartments, and my sister's room has been closed since her death."

She led the way up the servants' staircase to the pretty room, rendered cheerful and summery by white wicker furniture and gay chintz draperies. It seemed impossible that tragedy should ever have entered here, yet the detective's eye focussed at once upon a garishly-beaded Indian basket upon the under shelf of the table. From it overflowed a tangle of vari-colored silken threads; and in its center a square of tan linen, held in an oval embroidery-frame, showed a glowing poppy half finished from which a scarlet thread like a thin stream of blood meandered over the side of the basket.

Odell took up the square of embroidery.

"The needle is not here," he commented. "The doctor took it for analysis, no doubt."

"Yes. I think he feared that the poisoning which resulted from its prick might have been due to some of those new dyes in the silk, for he took some of that also; but he told us later that he had discovered nothing that could in any way account for the fatal result." Miss Meade touched the back of a low chair. "Here is where my sister sat when it happened, Sergeant Odell; and I was seated across the table, using the Martha Washington sewing-stand there. What are you looking for?"

"The packet from which the embroidery needle was taken," he responded.

She delved into the brilliant disorder of the basket and brought forth a black paper packet which she handed to him. He opened it, glanced at the needles, and put it into

his pocket. Then taking up a pair of scissors which was attached by a bright-hued ribbon to the handle of the basket he clipped off a length of the scarlet strand which dangled from the embroidery frame.

"That's all, I think." He still spoke in a lowered tone, mindful of the injured man in the next room. "I am going up now to look over the apartments of the young man who died last week. I have the keys—"

To his astonishment Miss Meade announced:

"I will accompany you. It has all been placed in order, of course; and I believe Mr. Titheredge and my brother-in-law have removed all the letters and personal effects, but I can explain to you the position of the body as I saw it."

"I do not like to subject you to the ordeal—", the detective began, but she silenced him.

"I am strong enough, and it is my duty to render you all the aid I can in consequence of Mr. Lorne's incapacity."

She preceded him up the stairs and led him along the hall to the door of the front room; but as he took out the key to insert it in the lock, the door at the back flew open and Gene appeared, rage and fear struggling for supremacy on his weak countenance.

"I've been waiting for you," he declared hotly. "I'll thank you to return the letters and notebook you stole from my desk."

"They will be returned to you in good time, Mr. Chalmers," the detective replied smoothly. "Unless, of course, they are required as evidence."

"Evidence of what!" shouted the enraged young man. "I suppose you'll accuse me next of killing my own brother

and trying to commit suicide by pulling down that portrait on my own head last night!"

"Mr. Chalmers, when I knocked upon your door an hour ago I interrupted you at your task of burning some letters and papers in your grate."

"What of it?" Gene demanded. "A fellow's got some rights, I guess, to keep his own private affairs from being pored over by you d—d—"

"Gene!" Miss Meade interrupted, and then turning to the detective she added: "I—I think I will leave you. Gene can show you Julian's room; and you will, I am sure, want to talk to him alone."

She hurried silently down the stairs and when she had disappeared the two young men faced each other.

"Mr. Chalmers, when you started to burn those papers in your grate this morning was it perfectly clean?"

The unexpected, seemingly irrelevant question caught the other temporarily off guard.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Come and I will show you." Odell walked straight past Gene and into his room, and the latter, his resentment momentarily submerged in surprise, followed.

The detective knelt down by the hearth.

"Will you bring me an envelope?" he requested. Then, as Gene complied: "I want you to look closely at the ashes, Mr. Chalmers. What do you see?"

As he spoke he scooped some into the envelope, sealed it and placed it in his pocket.

"Why, just ashes!" Gene's tone betokened amazement, but his frightened face went a shade more pale.

"See any difference in the color?" Odell persisted. "Don't you know that everything that is inflammable and of a different texture or substance leaves a different ash behind? Those pale, gray, satiny flakes are from the paper which you burned; these coarser, slightly darker ones are from something else. *What* did you burn here this morning or last night, Mr. Chalmers?"

"Nothing! I swear it!" Gene cried huskily. "For God's sake, Sergeant, tell me what you are driving at! When I started to burn the letters it seems to me that I did notice some other ashes there in the grate, but I paid no attention to them."

"You detected no odor as of smoke in your room?"

"None. I haven't been long out of it to-day anyway; I was awakened by Dad's fall and stayed with him only until you arrived. If anything had been burned here I surely would have smelt the smoke when I came up to destroy the letters."

"Mr. Chalmers, when was the last time you had a fire in this grate?" Odell looked up in time to catch the younger man's swift change of expression.

"I—I can't remember," Gene stammered. "Sometime in the early spring, I imagine."

"I do not mean a coal fire, but papers, trash, anything; when was the last time before this morning that something was burned here?"

"I couldn't tell you, Sergeant. It's a habit of mine to burn old letters and such things there instead of having the maid take them downstairs. She always cleans it out whenever she finds any ashes there."

He caught himself up suddenly as he realized the slip he had made, and a look of dogged despair came over his face, but he added hastily:

"What are those darker ashes from? What had been burned in the grate before my letters?"

"That will be determined on analysis." The detective seemed not to have noted Gene's damaging statement, and the young man breathed freer again. "You say it is a habit of yours to burn things here; surely you can recall approximately the last time you made use of the grate. Was it a few days ago, a week, a month?"

"It was a week ago." The reply came sullenly in a lowered tone.

"What did you burn then?"

"Merely some old letters and snapshots. I—I was cleaning out a trunk; I meant to go camping next week."

The explanation was offered glibly, yet Gene could not meet Odell's eyes; and he flushed as if conscious that his falsehood had been recognized for what it was although the detective gave no outward sign. Instead he rose, brushed off his knees and remarked in a brisk, changed tone:

"If your memory should improve let me know. I am going now to your brother's room. Will you come and show me where the body was when you discovered it?"

"I didn't discover it," Gene denied sulkily. Nevertheless, he turned to the door. "Peters did that, when my stepfather sent him up here to call Julian. When he gave the alarm Dad was the first to reach the room; I tried to pass him but he blocked the stairway. Julian's room was empty and Dad called once, then went to the bathroom door and collapsed against it at—at what he saw. I followed and

looked over his shoulder—and then, I don't know; I went to pieces, I guess."

As he talked they had passed along the hall to the front room and Odell unlocked the door. The windows were open, but the old-fashioned Venetian blinds were drawn close to keep out any possible rain, and in the gloom the furniture loomed indistinctly.

Gradually, however, as his eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness Odell made out the outlines of a bed, a dresser, a desk, a table, an old chest of drawers, and, in the wall at right angles to the hall, the casing of another door.

He went to the nearest window, folded one of the blinds halfway back, and then turned inquiringly to Gene, who had visibly hung back.

"Is that the bathroom?" He motioned toward the door in the opposite wall, and at the younger man's nod he strode over to it. After a moment Gene followed.

"Julian had on a thin bathrobe over his pajamas and he had not taken his bath, although the tub was drawn," he volunteered. "I seemed to take the whole thing in at one glance, every detail, as though it had been photographed on my mind; I wish to heaven I could forget it! His shaving-mug stood just here on the edge of the wash-basin, with the brush and stick of soap beside it; and he was lying on his back on the floor with the razor under one of his hands. He looked as if he had just sunk down, except for the wound in his throat and the blood everywhere. There were bloody handprints, too, along the outer rim of the tub nearest him, as if he had tried to save himself from falling— Oh, I can't—"

"You are sure of that?" Odell, who had been following with his eyes the location of each object as Gene described the scene, now turned and looked at him sharply. "You are sure there were the prints of hands in blood upon the rim of the tub?"

"Positive of it," Gene returned. "I told you I could not forget a single detail. I don't see why he didn't call for help or something when he found he could not stop the bleeding. I never heard a thing and I was almost in the next room."

"Why do you say 'almost'?" The detective had grasped the point, but it was as if subconsciously. The vital fact which had been revealed to him inadvertently enough by his companion filled all his thoughts.

"Because the dressing-room is beyond that door, and I've got some gymnasium stuff stacked against it."

"Why wasn't the door left open?"

Gene hesitated.

"It used to be and we shared this bath together," he admitted finally. "But lately Julian wanted this to himself, so I used the bathroom across the hall."

"Did you examine the marks on the tub that morning, Mr. Chalmers?"

"No." Gene shuddered. "I don't know what I did after I saw him lying there and realized what must have happened; I guess I went crazy for a little while. The first I knew I was lying across Julian's bed, and Dad was shaking me and telling me to go downstairs. I didn't see Julian again, not even in the casket; I couldn't."

The detective turned from the doorway and began open-

ing the drawers of the dresser, but they as well as the desk and closet had been stripped bare.

"Dad and old Titheredge carted off everything but the clothes," explained Gene. "Aunt Effie packed those away in the attic, I think. I know she didn't *give* them away."

He laughed shortly in a rueful manner and Odell demanded:

"Why? How do you know?"

"Because she never gave a thing away in her life. She hoards everything she can lay her hands on."

Odell allowed the comment to pass without remark, but he stored it away for further reference. If true, it threw an interesting side-light on the character of the mouse-like spinster downstairs. She did not look like a miser, and her apparent attitude toward the rest of the family was that of a typical poor relation; yet she must possess money. She owned at least a half interest in the house in which she lived like a veritable shadow.

After a further cursory examination of the room he motioned Gene to precede him to the hall, and locking the door he placed the key in his pocket.

"Where does Farley Drew live?" he asked.

"In the Bellemonde Annex," Gene responded unguardedly, then added: "For God's sake, don't go to him with anything of this, Sergeant. He—he hates anything like notoriety, and he can make a lot of trouble."

"For whom?" Odell demanded as the other paused.

"Oh, well, I don't want to lose his friendship," Gene mumbled. "It isn't fair to drag other people into a rotten scandal like this; and they're bound to resent it. Besides,

he knows nothing whatever about it; I haven't even seen him since Julian's funeral."

He wandered back into his own room as the detective started downstairs.

Barry Odell was not thinking of Farley Drew at that moment, however, nor was the discovery in the bathroom upon his mind. His cogitations concerned a certain envelope in his pocket, containing two kinds of ashes; those left from burned paper and from burned wood. For the wood-ashes were the residue from incinerated sawdust and still contained uncharred flecks of it—the sawdust which was missing after that nocturnal carpentering-job on the top step of the stairs.

CHAPTER VII

"WATCH THEIR EYES"

AS Barry Odell reached the second floor he found himself confronting a woman he had not seen before; a servant evidently from her trim livery. She had just come from one of the side rooms, closing the door quietly behind her; but the detective caught the sound of sobbing and high-pitched feminine tones within, and he concluded it to be occupied by the chagrined Cissie.

The woman who stood regarding him with frank interest and curiosity was about thirty, thin to the point of angularity; and her sharp-chinned, sallow face baffled him with a sense of half recognition. He recalled what Miss Meade had told him of the lady's maid and spoke.

"You are Gerda?"

"Yes, sir," the woman replied quietly, without surprise; and there was an expectant look in her gray-green eyes.

"Come downstairs, please; I want to talk to you."

She followed him without a word to the drawing-room, where she stood before him, ignoring the chair toward which he had made a tentative gesture.

"How long have you been employed here?"

"Six months, sir. That is all."

"You were the personal maid of Mrs. Lorne and Miss Chalmers?"

"Yes, sir. And of the other ladies also when they required my services." She enunciated clearly but carefully, as if speaking in a language which was not her native one; and there was a slight staccato accent which she seemingly could not eliminate.

"You are French?"

She shook her head.

"Swiss, sir. I come from Zurich."

"Do you recall the day when Mrs. Lorne pricked her finger with her embroidery needle?"

"Perfectly, sir, but from the day after. I knew nothing of it until one morning when Madame awoke with her hand all inflamed and remembered herself about the accident with the embroidery needle on the previous day."

"She did not call the doctor immediately?"

"No, sir; not for three days, although Mees Meade implored her to do so. Mees Meade and I, we poulticed the hand and bandaged it; but it grew worse, until finally Madame consented to send for the doctor. After the nurses came I was not allowed in the room until just at the last, and then Madame was delirious."

Gerda had kept her curious light eyes steadily fixed on the detective's face, and although she replied readily, almost mechanically, to his questioning, the impression of hushed anticipation lingered.

"You know who I am, of course?"

Gerda bowed.

"The officer detective from Police Headquarters, is it not so? Otherwise I should not be talking of Madame."

"You understand that you must be perfectly frank with me?"

Once more she inclined her head.

"I desire only to aid in discovering the truth."

Odell eyed her with growing interest, and the consciousness of having seen her somewhere at some past time increased. Her diction was superior to that usually encountered in one in her position, and her bearing although perfectly respectful suggested a certain dignity equally incompatible.

"When did you first learn of the discovery of Mr. Chalmers's body last week?"

"When Mr. Lorne called me to attend Mees Meade after he had led her down from the room of poor Mr. Chalmers. But I knew there was trouble, terrible trouble before that, sir, when Mr. Lorne sent the butler, Peters, up to call the young gentleman."

"Where were you at the time?"

"In the room of Mees Cissie. She had just had her coffee and was preparing to get up. We heard Peters pass the door and then come stumbling down, crying out in a choked, frightened way. Mees Cissie wanted me to go and find out what had happened, but I could not, sir. The strength left me, and I sank down into a chair. We heard Mr. Lorne go up and Mr. Gene, but Mees Meade walks so softly that we did not know when she passed the door. I was still there in that chair when Mr. Lorne called to me."

"You remained in attendance on the ladies all the morning?" Odell's questions were becoming as mechanical as the replies. He could not force the woman's personality into a secondary place, and the sense of incongruity still prevailed.

"With Mees Meade until she had recovered her com-

posure, sir. Afterward with Mees Cissie, who was hysterical. It was lunch-time before I descended to the servants' dining-room in the basement."

"Gerda, when was it that you first heard talk among the servants that there was something queer about these two deaths so close together?"

"Something queer, sir?" she repeated. "Do you mean that it might be a curse or fate or some strange mystery?"

Odell nodded.

"They were all discussing it when I entered the dining-room for lunch, sir; Peters and Marcelle, the cook, and Jane. They said it was not natural." She broke off with a shrug. "You must know the usual gossip of the—of our kind, sir. And it's not to be wondered at. Two deaths in a month in the same house and both from accident; it is enough to make anyone afraid to stay here."

She had retrieved her mistake but added another to it by too obviously straining for effect.

"You yourself did not take any stock in their superstitious fears, did you?" He deliberately adopted a more familiar tone, and she as instinctively withdrew from it.

"I felt uneasy, nervous, but I am not superstitious, sir."

"Then what made you feel uneasy?"

Again that little foreign shrug.

"I don't know, sir. Perhaps the gloom that hung over the house, the sorrow."

"Did you hear anything last night? Any sudden noise?"

"Yes, sir. I went to bed quite early, but I was still awake when I heard a faint crash far below. We sleep on the top floor, you know. This morning Peters told us of

the picture that fell down. But that was after the accident to Mr. Lorne."

"At what time did Peters leave the house?"

"I don't know, sir, but it must have been before nine. He slipped away while the doctor was here attending to Mr. Lorne, and none of us saw him go. He didn't say a word to anybody, but just walked out; his things are all here in his room, Jane says. He was the most frightened of us all this week and kept saying that we would be murdered in our beds, but I don't think he meant it; he didn't exactly know what he was afraid of."

She was forcing the volubility, Odell could see; and gradually the look of anticipation was fading from her eyes. Could it be that he had actually seen her somewhere before; that she had recognized him and waited for the recognition to be mutual? He determined to throw out a feeler.

"Gerda, where did you work before coming here?"

"Nowhere. That is, I had been ill for a very long time." She hesitated, but the eager look had come back into her eyes. "Before that I had been maid for a lady here in town for some years."

"Who was she?"

The answer came slowly with a curious, studied evenness of tone.

"A Madame Gael."

"Not Mrs. Quincy Gael who was divorced?"

"Yes, sir. But the divorce came later, after I had been taken ill and gone away."

"Did you ever see or hear of a Mr. Farley Drew in her home?"

"I read of him afterwards, sir, of course; but while I

was there, oh, no. I did not know there was such a gentleman." She paused and then added with a curious veiled significance in her tone: "I have worked in various other places, sir, and I have not always been a lady's maid. Once, long before my illness, when I was strong and my nerves were steady, I was an attendant in a private sanitarium."

Odell studied her for a moment. Confound the woman! What was she trying to get at, anyway? He had never been in a sanitarium in his life, either professionally or as a patient. True, he had been in a hospital once, when he had been knifed in pinching Luigi Lombardo the Dago killer, but—

"What kind of a sanitarium?" he demanded.

The eagerness flashed out in her eyes then and she bent toward him and spoke rapidly in a low, meaning tone.

"For the insane, sir. Have you ever seen any crazy people? If you have you never can mistake them, no matter how clever and cunning they are. There is a look in their eyes that gives them away to those who know."

"I've never run up against a case of insanity." Odell's preconceived ideas were in chaos. Clearly the woman did not for a moment think that she recognized him, but she spoke with a purpose. Could it be that she was trying to give him a tip? Her eagerness, her hushed voice, and the light in her eyes showed that she was not talking idly. "Why are you telling me this, Gerda?"

The woman stepped back, and a spot of color came into her sallow cheeks.

"It—it might come in handy in your profession some time, sir. There are more crazy people loose in society

and out of it than you would believe. No one realizes it; because the most dangerous kind are those who know themselves that they are mad, and they hide it from other folks with the cunning that a sane mind wouldn't be capable of." She halted and drew a deep breath as if the subject were finished; but as he maintained a noncommittal silence and permitted his expression to register nothing more than a casual interest, she suddenly advanced once more until she stood close to his chair.

"Watch people's eyes, sir, when you are on a case. Watch their eyes. It isn't that they'll be wild and shifty necessarily, but if you'll study them long enough there'll be a time when even for just a second they'll let go like a curtain that's been held together and you'll get a peep at the diseased brain back of them. They may be crafty enough to outwit you a hundred times, and cunning enough to guard their actions and their speech so that you would be called crazy yourself if you were to accuse them of anything; but they *can't always control their eyes!* Remember that, sir, and it will maybe help you a little sometime."

She turned as if to go but he caught her wrist.

"Wait a minute, Gerda. You've got some particular reason for telling me this. Do you mean that you know something? That someone in this house is insane?"

"Hush! Oh, hush!" She drew back and he released her. "I meant nothing. I thought only to do you a kindness, to tell you something that I had learned which might at some future time be useful to you. Forgive me, sir, if I have been impertinent and let me go. I think Mees Meade is calling me."

"You think nothing of the kind," he retorted. "You're

trying to tell me something, and you are afraid to come through with it. I could take you down to Headquarters and make you speak; but I won't, because you've volunteered this to me and I will keep quiet about it. I think you ought to finish what you've started, though. Tell me what's on your mind."

"Nothing," she repeated, still in hushed but vehement tones. "There is nothing on my mind, sir. I should not have spoken. You will let me depart now?"

Odell saw that there was nothing more to be gained from her at the time, either by bullying or cajolery, and he nodded reluctantly.

"All right, Gerda. If you have anything else you want to say to me any time just let me know, and I promise you I'll keep it to myself. Thank you for giving me the tip for future cases."

He had struck the right note, for at the door she turned and came slowly back.

"Remember, then, one thing that I have said to you, sir. Sometimes they are able to hide it so cleverly that you would be thought crazy yourself if you accused them without proof."

This time she left the room without looking back, and for a space he sat mentally going over their interview word for word. Her last admonition had made her attitude clear to him; she suspected someone but without actual knowledge, without proof. She also was convinced of that person's insanity, but whether that conviction came from mere intuition or expert knowledge of such cases remained to be seen. She might have lied about having been an attendant in a sanitarium; she looked quite capable of lying

her soul away if it suited her purpose, yet unless she were a consummate actress she had been absolutely sincere in her warning. Her own gray-green eyes were strange, inscrutable except when alive with eagerness; they reminded him of those of some gaunt, famished cat. What a good, consistent hater she would be!

He aroused himself at last from his speculations and rang the bell. After an interval Jane, the buxom housemaid, appeared.

"Jane, there will be two men here presently to hang that picture in the library. Let me know when they come."

"Ye—yes, sir." Jane bobbed her head and prepared to retire from his presence with obvious haste.

"Here, wait a minute. I want to talk to you."

Her rosy cheeks blanched.

"Yes, sir." There was a distinct quaver in her tones.

"How long have you been employed here?"

"Three y-years, sir, and never a better mistress than the poor lady that's gone could a girl have!" This was easy ground and she breathed more freely.

"Who was the lady's maid before Gerda came?"

"Margaret McGrath, though she called herself Marguerite. She was a *nice* girl, sir, friendly and didn't give herself no airs. She left to get married to—"

"So she was nicer than Gerda, eh?" Odell regarded her quizzically, and she tossed her head.

"That stuck-up thing? You'd think she was a lady herself the way she goes along with her head in the air, and the cold politeness of her, as if the rest of us was nothing but dirt beneath her feet!" Jane's color had returned, and now it deepened with resentment. "It ain't such a grand

job to be a lady's maid; I've known some housekeepers that was more free and pleasant to get along with, and I don't care if you go and tell her I said so. Didn't even want to room with me when she came, but got Mrs. Lorne to give her a room to herself. She won't be here long, though, now the poor mistress is gone."

"Why?" asked Odell.

"Because she's no good as a personal maid. I heard Miss Cissie say so herself. Anybody can mend lace and keep things picked up; but she's such a blockhead she can't even take messages over the 'phone for Miss Cissie, and she has to attend to it for herself. Miss Cissie complained about it to her mother only a few days before the poor lady hurt herself with that needle, but Mrs. Lorne liked her and wouldn't hear of sending her away. I guess things'll be different now."

It was evident that the affronted Jane would be quite willing to continue the subject indefinitely, but the detective had learned what he wanted to know and promptly took advantage of the opening which offered.

"What was the needle like which caused Mrs. Lorne's illness? Did you see it?"

"Indeed I did, sir." Jane visibly swelled with importance. "Wasn't it me went and got it when the doctor asked to see it? Miss Meade came out of the sickroom and told me to go get it, and I did; but I wrapped my hand up good in a towel before I touched it, sir, as you may believe. There it was, sticking into the work she'd dropped as innocent as if it wasn't the cause of what was going to be the poor lady's death. It had become unthreaded from the red silk, but it was right in place for the next stitch.

I gave it to Doctor Adams myself, and then he sent me back for some of the embroidery silk and I got that too."

"Jane, when Mr. Chalmers died last week, who told you of it?"

"Peters, sir. It was too early for me to do the rooms upstairs and I'd cleaned all the parlor floor and was down in the kitchen when he came as white as a sheet and told us. I was like to faint, sir, and I haven't got the black fear off me yet! I'd be giving notice but for Miss Meade; she's so kind of helpless that I couldn't bear to leave her in the lurch, but I'm more scared than ever now."

"Why?"

"Well, that picture falling always means death, sure; and the way accidents have been happening in the family looks like there was a curse on it, sir. There's a dog that comes and howls under the windows every night and fair gives me the creeps."

"That's all nonsense, Jane. Did you hear anything last night; not only when the picture fell but afterward, late in the night?"

"I did not, sir, thanks be!" She crossed herself devoutly; then her round, vacuous blue eyes opened wide upon the detective. "I heard nothing from the time I laid my head on the pillow at nine o'clock until the alarm clock went off. I was dusting the parlor here when Mr. Lorne came tumbling down the stairs."

"Why didn't you go out to help him?"

"Because I was too scared to move," Jane responded frankly. "After they'd got him in the library I crept out and down to the kitchen."

"You were scared, eh? Just because Mr. Lorne fell

downstairs?" Odell's tone was scornful and Jane bridled beneath it.

"After the deaths and all, it's no wonder I was. I thought he was dead too, and it put me in a panic. If it's all nonsense, sir, as you say, why is it that the police are here?"

He laughed at the impudent thrust.

"To put a stop to the silly notions you've all got. Jane, that morning when young Mr. Chalmers died, who cleaned up his room and the bathroom after the undertaker had gone?"

Jane's color ebbed in her cheeks.

"I did, sir; me and the cook together, for I wouldn't have gone into that room alone for all the money in the world." She shuddered. "We didn't wait for the undertaker either; as soon as the doctor came and the med—medical examiner, I think you call it—and made out papers as to how the poor young gentleman had died, the body was carried into one of the guest-rooms across the hall, and me and the cook started in on the bathroom. It was fairly ghastly, sir. There was blood everywhere—"

She was evidently going on with a gruesome relish, but the detective interrupted her.

"Did you notice any on the tub?"

"Yes, sir. The marks of poor Mr. Julian's hands covered with it, where he'd tried to keep himself up."

"Both hands, Jane? Are you sure of it?"

"Yes, sir, both hands. I remember because I called the cook's attention to them. Some of them was blurred, but there was one place where his two hands had grabbed the edge of the tub side by side. Cook can tell you, sir. There was the mark of both hands, plain."

CHAPTER VIII

THE NEEDLE

"I DON'T need the cook to corroborate you, Jane." The detective rose. "But I want to have a little talk with her nevertheless. Will you show me to the kitchen?"

Jane hesitated.

"She'll be starting lunch soon, sir, and I'd not like to be the one to bother her. She's goodhearted but fiery, being French."

"Never mind about that. I want to see her."

With obvious trepidation Jane led the way downstairs to a spacious kitchen where a very fat woman stood at the table beating eggs. She glanced up, lifting a triple row of chins and glared at the intruders; and Jane turned incontinently and fled.

"Good morning, Marcelle." He recalled opportunely that Miss Meade had mentioned her name to him.

"*Bon jour,* Monsieur," she responded with native politeness, but her small eyes were stony. "Will Monsieur have the goodness to tell me what he desires in my kitchen?"

"Something more important than that very excellent omelette which you are making." He smiled genially. "I'm from Police Headquarters."

"So I have heard, Monsieur, but the children must eat just the same. I do not know where this house would go

to if it were not for me. No one keeping regular hours, no one eating." She turned to him and held out both hands. "I ask you, Monsieur, how one can take the sorrow when it comes, how one can bear the fear of he knows not what, if he have not the full stomach? Me, I am afraid, I tr-remble, I think I shall be the next that this so evil fiend which possesses this house shall take; but when I have eaten I say: 'If it comes, it comes. *C'est tout.* If it does not come, I give myself the great fear for nothing.'"

"There's philosophy in that," Odell conceded. "But I can't sit down and let it come to you all again, you know. I am here to find out if I can who this fiend of yours is, and I must have help. As you say, if it were not for you this house would be indeed upside down; and so I came to you. Tell me, Marcelle, what do you think of it all?"

"Me? I think much better of it since this morning, Monsieur." His crass flattery had had its effect, and Marcelle, the omelette forgotten, faced him with a good-natured smile and her fat arms akimbo. "Before, when Monsieur Julian was taken so soon after his mother, I say to myself: 'It is not good. It is not the will of the good God as Mademoiselle Meade try to tell me, nor is it accident which take two from the same family in so quick time. It is evil, and I do not know whether that evil be human or of the infernal spirits.' Now that I know it is human I am not so afraid. I wait only to catch him at his work!"

She made an eloquent gesture and was turning again to the table when Odell asked a hurried question.

"This is the tradesmen's door, is it not? The only back door?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"You can see anyone who goes out?"

"No one comes or goes that way that I do not know it, Monsieur."

"Did you see Peters when he left this morning?"

"No, Monsieur. That poltroon! Never did I like his eyes."

Odell started. Could that be what Gerda had meant? But why should she warn him when Peters had already disappeared?

"That he should run when women stay!" Marcelle continued in fine scorn. "He knew better than to go this way, for I should have stopped him. It must be that he used the front entrance. *Bête!*"

"Jane tells me that you helped her clean the rooms of young Mr. Chalmers after he died. Did you notice any marks upon the tub?"

"But yes, Monsieur. The marks of both the poor child's hands. It was terrible, that sight! It is not well to think of. Me, I am most sorry for poor Monsieur Gene."

"For Monsieur Gene," repeated the detective in astonishment. "Were he and his brother so inseparable, then?"

"It is not that, Monsieur; but the very night before Monsieur Julian died they have so wicked a quarrel! Me, I am a light sleeper and my room is just at the head of the stairs above them. On Tuesday evening I make a soufflé for dessert—and figure to yourself, it is a failure, it falls!" She paused dramatically. "I am disconsolate; for only an artist can make a soufflé, and I think that I am losing my skill. I have the headache and I am sick in my

heart! I go to bed and at last I sleep, but I wake very late and I hear loud voices.

"I listen, for my door is open because of the heat. It is Monsieur Julian and Monsieur Gene and they are both so angry! I rise to close my door, but I hear one word that make me stand still like a statue. It is 'thief' and it is Monsieur Julian who says it. Then there is the sound of a blow; and me, I go out in the hall and look over the banisters. Monsieur Julian's door is also open, and there is the sound of scuffling and the messieurs breathing hoarsely and cursing.

"At last there came a jar and squeak of the bed-springs, as if one had thrown the other across the bed; and in a moment Monsieur Julian appear at the door of his room dragging Monsieur Gene by the collar.

"He throw him out into the hall and close the door; and me, I go back into my room without waiting to see Monsieur Gene pick himself up. But every time I look at his so sad face now I think he grieves him because his brother died without the reconciliation."

"You do not recall any more of the conversation than just the one word 'thief', do you, Marcelle?"

"No, Monsieur; and that was only the talk of bad little boys calling the names to each other that they did not mean. But this will not help you in your search nor put my omelette in the pan."

She turned with an air of finality to the table, and the detective went slowly upstairs. So Julian and Gene had quarreled on the last night of the former's life, and Gene had been afraid or unwilling to admit it to him that morning.

Jane met him at the head of the stairs.

"The men are here now to put up the picture, sir."

"Very well, I'll see them." He went to the library, where he found two workmen standing in dubious silence before the portrait which they had raised from the desk. At his approach they turned and the huskier of the two remarked:

"We can't handle this. We ain't used to this sort of work, boss."

"I thought not." Odell smiled. "Are you the same men who were here this morning?"

"We are." The spokesman advanced truculently. "If you think it is any joke comin' twice and we paid by our time—"

"How long would it have taken you to hang that portrait, supposing you had done that sort of work before?" Odell interrupted.

"The good part of an hour," the other responded sulkily.

"Well, I'll pay you for that hour and you can loaf away the rest of it after the next two minutes if you'll give me your expert opinion on something you do know about."

The two men looked at each other and then the smaller one remarked:

"Sounds fair enough; but I knew there was somethin' phoney about this whole business after what happened this morning. What do you say, Bill?"

"All right." The other hitched his overall-strap over one shoulder. "We'll give it a try, sir."

Odell paid them and then drew from his pocket the short lengths of steel wire which he had cut from the back of the portrait-frame that morning.

"This end I clipped myself," he explained. "Can you

tell me how the other end was cut? By what sort of a tool?"

Each of the men took a piece of the wire and examined it doubtfully. After a moment the smaller one looked up with a grin.

"I give it up, boss," he said. "It wasn't a clipper or the ends would be pinched together more; these are all frayed out. Looks as if it had been chewed. What do you say, Bill?"

Bill proved all at once to be a person of tact as well as discernment.

"It was either one of two things; an electric circular saw or an electric file. If I've tumbled to the game right, mister, I figure there wouldn't have been room to work the circular saw." He winked expansively toward the portrait. "I guess you'll find that the party used an electric file, a small one but high-powered, and kept her hummin'."

"How long would it take to cut through one of these wires with the file you mention?" Odell asked.

"Five or six minutes."

"Does it make much noise?" the detective persisted.

"Only a low buzzin' and dronin'."

"Hard to operate?"

"No. A child could work it if it was taught how, but it takes strength to hold her in position once she gets to goin' so fast you can't see her. I wouldn't like to try it in any awk'ard position,"—again he glanced at the portrait—"and I'm the strongest man at Kenny's."

"That's all I wanted to know." Odell put the pieces of wire back into his pocket. "You can go now. You've got forty-five minutes to yourselves."

"Yes, thank'ee, sir."

After they had taken their departure the detective stood for a minute or two in thought and then turned to ring the bell, but he found himself confronted once more by Miss Meade.

"Sergeant Odell, who were those men?"

"They were sent for to rehang the portrait, I believe, but they were mere carpenters and unable to handle the job," he replied. How long she had been standing there he could not imagine, and he began to feel a certain irritation against her. She was very gentle and appealing and all that, but why couldn't she walk so that one could hear her coming?

"Peters must have sent for them before he left, I suppose, but he should have consulted me." She was gazing at the face of the portrait and her voice was introspective. "That was my father, you know. He—but I am forgetting. I came to ask you if I might send you a tray of lunch in here?"

"Thanks, no." He glanced at his watch. "Miss Meade, will you give me the address of the beauty-parlor where Mrs. Lorne was having treatments at the time of her death?"

"It is not exactly a beauty-parlor; it is called Monsieur Florian's, and is at 681 Fifth Avenue. He considers himself a specialist, I believe; but I saw no difference in my sister. To me she had not changed since her first marriage."

"A specialist, you say? Will you tell me too, Miss Meade, what Doctor Adams's office hours are?"

"From nine to ten, one to two, and five to seven," she replied. "But he will look in sometime this afternoon to see

how Mr. Lorne is getting along; and you may consult him then if you wish to do so."

"I do not know when I can get back, Miss Meade. I have an appointment now which I must keep. When I return I want to have an interview with Miss Chalmers and also with her brother, her youngest brother."

"I am afraid that will be impossible. He is a semi-invalid, and this is one of his bad days—"

Her expostulation was interrupted by a voice from the doorway.

"If you please, Miss Meade, there are four men here, and they say they want to speak to Sergeant Odell." It was Jane, and at her heels four plainclothesmen entered and stopped just within the doorway.

"Hello, Smith, Kelly, Porter; I asked the chief to be sure to send you. Hello, Taylor." Odell greeted them in turn and then remarked to the shrinking figure beside him, "They're my assistants from headquarters, Miss Meade. I'm sorry to inflict them upon you, but we've got to guard against a repetition of the outrages of last night and this morning. Please give them full liberty to go where they like about the house, and tell everyone that they are acting under my orders and must not be interfered with."

"Certainly, Sergeant Odell." Miss Meade moved to the door. "Let me know if there is anything I can do to aid them."

Odell issued instructions to his men, glanced at a telephone book for a moment, and then left the house. If he walked rapidly enough he could catch Doctor Adams at his office before he started upon his afternoon round of visits. He felt that he needed air and exercise after the morning

with its problems crowding fast upon each other's heels. He had acquired a bewildering amount of data, most of which must in the end prove to be irrelevant; but he had made progress in one direction at least, and there remained just one more point to be cleared up before he handed in his report of the morning's progress to his chief.

Doctor Adams's office, the address of which he had learned in that last hasty glimpse at the telephone book, was a most imposing one; but the reception room was practically empty owing to the lateness of the hour, and soon Odell was ushered into the private consulting-office.

The doctor proved to be a small, genial man of about sixty, with a shock of snow-white hair and keen twinkling dark eyes beneath bushy white brows.

"From Police Headquarters?" he repeated when his visitor had disclosed his identity.

"Yes, Doctor. We have been asked to inquire into the death of Mrs. Richard Lorne."

"Dear me!" The doctor shook his head. "The medical examiner was quite satisfied with my report and that of the specialists. This will be a sad blow to the family. I cannot think who—"

"It was the family themselves who asked for an investigation," Odell remarked. "I believe that the cause of Mrs. Lorne's death was not fully determined."

"Most certainly it was!" the little doctor replied indignantly. "She died from blood-poisoning. We were all agreed upon that."

"Yet you were unable to check it," Odell reminded him quietly. "Were you all agreed also upon the nature of the poison involved?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"The specialists admit that the case baffled them from the start; that they advised every known method of cure, but the infection kept spreading; and that they virtually gave up the case at last," Odell explained mendaciously.

"Well, if McCutchen admitted that there is no harm in my telling you that it was unique in my experience. There was every evidence of blood-poison, and yet it failed to respond in the least degree to the treatment usual in such cases," Doctor Adams admitted. "The blood itself, of which we took many samples for analysis, did not reveal the slightest trace of any poison; and the patient, although suffering great pain, remained conscious almost until the last."

"I believe you took some of the embroidery silk with which Mrs. Lorne had been working at the time she pricked her finger; did you not?"

"Yes, Sergeant. I thought that perhaps some of the dye had entered the puncture, but upon analysis it proved to be harmless."

The detective leaned forward in his chair.

"You took the needle also, I believe?"

The physician nodded.

"It was as clean as though it had been sterilized. The infection must have come from something else. If people would only realize the necessity of sterilization of even the smallest abrasion or puncture the death-rate would be lowered to an astonishing degree."

"Perhaps there was something wrong with Mrs. Lorne's blood," Odell ventured. "Could that have been a contributory cause, Doctor?"

"No," the other replied emphatically. "Her blood was

almost one-hundred per cent pure. Mrs. Lorne was in perfect health until the day she ran the needle into her finger. I have been her family physician for many years. I brought all her children into the world, and I knew her constitution thoroughly. Moreover, the analysis of her blood would have shown any impurity."

"You were aware that up to the time of her illness she was taking a course of beauty treatment of some sort?"

The doctor snorted.

"Beauty butchery, you mean!" he retorted. "Quack surgery! Face-lifting, they call it; cut the skin around the temples and raise it to remove wrinkles and make the skin tight. I did all I could to prevent her making a fool of herself; but if you had known Mrs. Lorne, Sergeant, you would know that you might as well have talked to the winds as try to dissuade her from anything she had set her mind upon. She had the effrontery to tell her husband that I had ordered her to stay in town and undergo a course of electrical treatments; and I—I was weak enough to back her up. But I watched the progress of the skin-lifting process carefully, and I can certify that it had nothing to do with her death. The treatment was completed and the slight incisions fully healed several days before the needle episode."

"Have you that needle now, Doctor?" The query was made in a quiet, almost casual tone, but it seemed an age to the detective before the little doctor responded:

"I have. I don't know why I preserved it; but it marked a case which was, as I have said, unique in my experience. Would you like to see it, Sergeant?"

"If you will be so kind."

The physician walked over to a glass case which stood

against the wall and removed from it a small box, which he laid upon the table and opened. Odell drew his chair up to the table and took from his pocket the small black paper packet and a piece of scarlet embroidery silk.

Then, while Doctor Adams watched him with growing amazement, he picked up the needle from the box, opened the packet and compared the others with it, afterward laying the packet aside. Next he took up the piece of embroidery silk and endeavored to thread the needle. His maneuvers would have been comic had it not been for the tenseness of his expression as for the following ten minutes he struggled with his unaccustomed task. At last he looked up at the other.

"Doctor Adams, while I was awaiting my turn to consult you I studied the nurse who acts as attendant in your waiting-room. I saw that she had keen eyes and a steady hand. May I ask that you summon her for a moment?"

"Certainly, Sergeant." The physician pressed a button on his desk. "I must confess that I am tremendously interested, but I cannot imagine what point you are trying to satisfy yourself upon."

"I will tell you presently," Odell responded as the trim young woman entered.

"Miss Wardell, this gentleman would like you to do something for him."

She shifted her tranquil gaze from the doctor to his visitor, and Odell held out to her the needle and silk.

"Will you thread this for me, please?"

Wondering, Miss Wardell took them from him; but after one or two fruitless attempts to comply she raised her eyes again to his.

"It is impossible," she said quietly. "The silk is far too coarse for this needle. Wait." She had spied the packet upon the table, and opening it she selected another needle and threaded it triumphantly. "See. This is the proper needle for this silk; it is at least three sizes larger than the one you gave me first."

"Thank you." The detective's face gave no sign of the excitement which was surging within him. "You have decided a very nice little point for me."

When Miss Wardell had departed the physician bent over the table and demanded: "What does this all mean?"

"It means, Doctor, that I have obtained the last proof I required to convince me that my theory was based on fact. This needle which was given to you was not the one with which Mrs. Lorne pricked her finger; it had been substituted for the original, placed in the embroidery work on which the unfortunate lady had been engaged; and only the haste with which the substitution was made and the carelessness shown in selecting a needle at random from this packet without regard to its size has revealed the truth. Mrs. Lorne was murdered!"

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CHAPTER IX

DOCTOR MC CUTCHEN'S THEORY

ON leaving the physician's office, Odell made his way to the establishment of the beauty expert. He found Monsieur Florian to be an excitable, dapper little Frenchman with a piping voice and the manners of a dancing-master.

The detective introduced himself as a friend of the Lorne family; and Monsieur Florian was profuse in his regret at the untimely death of his client, and only too willing to demonstrate each phase of his treatment in order to prove that it could not have left Mrs. Lorne in a condition which would be conducive to blood-poisoning from the needle-prick.

Odell departed satisfied that nothing further was to be learned there, and after a hasty, belated luncheon he visited the offices of each of the specialists who had been called into consultation by Doctor Adams. Doctor Kelland was out on a case and Doctor Day gave the detective practically the same account of Mrs. Lorne's fatal illness as had Doctor Adams; it was only when he reached the great McCutchen that a ray of enlightenment came to him and he found an unexpected ally.

That internationally famous specialist on blood-diseases was a big enough man to admit the possibility of a mistake

in the diagnosis of the case, even before Odell disclosed the fact of the substituted needle; and when that was demonstrated to him he sprang from his chair and paced the floor, striking his clenched fist into the cupped palm of his other hand.

"Good God, what fools we were! What arrant fools! That goes to show you, Sergeant, how even those of us who think we stand at the top of our profession take too much for granted. There was no suggestion of foul play, the outward indications were identical with those of septicemia of the ordinary kind; and we looked no farther than our noses, even though we were battling for a life."

"Were you the first specialist called in consultation with Doctor Adams, sir?" asked Odell.

"No, the last; Kelland was called first, then Day. It was only when it was realized that the patient was sinking that I was sent for; and it was too late then for me to do anything for her, even if I had discovered the truth. Her heart would not have withstood the effect of any drastic treatment. I looked over the record of the case thoroughly and found practically nothing to suggest, for they had tried everything known to medical science." He was still pacing the floor; but now he turned and faced the detective squarely. "I should have known then that there was something vitally wrong, but appearances deceived me. I own that I had some misgivings at first, but Kelland and Day were so positive and the patient so far gone that I permitted my judgment to be swayed, although I was not satisfied in my own mind; I could not understand why the patient had not responded to the treatment."

He recommenced his restless promenade, and Odell was

silent for a moment or two. At last he remarked thoughtfully:

"It is a pity that there was no autopsy. I suppose it is too late now, Doctor McCutchen?"

"No. The autopsy *must* take place now, although I doubt that it will disclose anything of value toward revealing the truth. There are some poisons, you know, which can be introduced in just such a manner as by the prick of a needle that leave absolutely no trace in the system, and their effect is quick and sure; but they are rare and beyond the reach of a layman." He paused beside the desk. "I presume it would be unprofessional for me to ask if the family have any reason to suspect that Mrs. Lorne's death was not the result of sheer accident other than the fact that the needle was substituted?"

"I will tell you this, Doctor, under the seal of professional secrecy. You have heard of the tragic accident which befell Mrs. Lorne's eldest son only last week when while shaving he severed the jugular vein and died before help could reach him? I have good reason, amounting almost to proof, that his was not the hand which held the razor," Odell replied very gravely. "In addition to that, two attempts have been made since upon the lives of two other members of the family; and there is not the slightest clue to the identity of the murderer. These later attempts had they been successful would both have passed as accidents also, but for the fact that the guilty person had grown bolder and left unmistakable traces of his handiwork behind."

"Great heavens, this is frightful!" The specialist sank into his chair. "I read of young Mr. Chalmers's death, of course, but looked upon it unquestioningly as an accident.

I had noted his highly nervous condition at the time when I was called in consultation on his mother's case, and the newspaper account of the manner of his death appeared plausible enough. It is a horrible thing to believe, because taken in connection with the probable poisoning of his mother it points to the work—"

He hesitated and the detective finished the sentence for him.

"Of someone on the inside, some member of the household? Exactly, Doctor."

"But there is no clue, you say, to the identity of that someone? Has not Mr. Lorne any suspicion, any theory to advance?"

"Mr. Lorne was one of the intended victims himself and is too ill now to give me any information; but from the few words I did exchange with him I believe him to be as much in the dark as I am. They haven't an enemy in the world that I have been able to discover, Doctor; and the attorney who has been their family lawyer for many years has supplied me with the most minute details of their history." Odell paused. "If the crimes are not the work of someone in the house, there is at least a member of the household who has a guilty knowledge of them, for there must have been an accomplice inside to admit him. But I am taking up your valuable time, Doctor?"

"You are *not,* Sergeant," the specialist replied with emphasis. "A frightful mistake has been made by myself and my colleagues, and I want to do all that I can to retrieve it. Unfortunately, I was called in too late to save Mrs. Lorne in any event, as I told you; but I feel equally culpable with the others. Did you tell Doctor Day what

you have told me about the substitution of the needle?"

"No, Doctor. Merely that the family physician had admitted that the case stumped him from the beginning. The medical examiner will notify them both as well as Doctor Kelland and yourself of the time which will be settled upon for the exhumation of the body and the autopsy." The detective rose as if on the point of departure. "In the meantime, while the necessary formalities are being arranged, I wonder if you could give me something to work on?"

"I should be only too happy to, Sergeant. This is going to be rather a blow to my colleagues and myself when the truth reaches the public. But I'm not thinking of that now; all I want is to see justice done; and to be honest I feel a certain amount of professional curiosity. I'm anxious to know what poison was used and how we were all so cleverly hoodwinked." Doctor McCutchen's keen eyes narrowed behind their tortoise-rimmed glasses. "I'll be glad to have you call upon me for any help that I may be able to give you."

A discreet knock sounded upon the door, and at the specialist's impatient bark of admission a white-clad attendant put her head inside.

"Doctor, will you see—"

"Nobody this afternoon. Not at home until six!" He interrupted her shortly, and as the head withdrew he turned to the detective. "What information can I give you, Sergeant?"

"You spoke just now of certain poisons which might have been used and which would leave no traces in the system, Doctor. Will you tell me about them and where they might

be obtained by someone not a member of the medical profession?"

"There are comparatively few—" The specialist broke off abruptly. "I tell you, there's something wrong with that poisoned-needle theory. I have made about as profound a study of toxicology as anyone in the country, and I do not know of any poison so introduced and leaving no trace which would produce that effect of a slowly progressing septicemia. There are some which would cause instant death and others which would merely paralyze. I naturally do not care to give an opinion before the autopsy, especially in view of the mistake which you have convinced me that my colleagues and I have made; but I don't mind advancing a theory for your consideration.

"What if that needle had not been poisoned in the sense you mean? What if it had merely been dipped in the serum from some other case of blood-poisoning? That is the one serious danger which surgeons have to face, you know, and which has brought about meticulous care in sterilization. The result would have been exactly what was seen in Mrs. Lorne's case at first."

"Yes; but she did not respond to any of the forms of treatment which were tried." Odell saw his carefully built-up theory falling to pieces. "You are positive, Doctor, that there is no poison?"

The specialist waved the question aside impatiently.

"I said 'at first,' Sergeant. Let us suppose, then, that Mrs. Lorne is really suffering from infection: let us suppose also that the would-be murderer or his confederate is right at hand, a trusted member of the household. As I

remember, Doctor Adams was not called in until the third day and by that time the infection had spread well up into the lower arm. One of his first steps would be to make an incision near the original puncture for drainage. What if after this was accomplished and the first treatment had been finished but before the patient had begun to respond to it, the dressing had been removed and *the incision reinfected?* What if this were repeated until death ensued? Mrs. Lorne would have died from septicemia, true; but she would have been murdered as surely as if she had been stabbed through the heart."

"By George, I believe you have hit it, Doctor," Odell exclaimed. Then a shade of doubt crossed his face, to be as quickly suppressed, and he added hastily, "I'm going to act upon that theory at once. Thank you for giving me so much of your time."

"You will keep me informed of your progress?" the specialist asked as they shook hands.

"Surely; and you will hear from the medical examiner about the autopsy. Thank you again, sir, and good afternoon."

In the street once more, Odell turned his footsteps in the direction of the Meade house. The specialist's theory was ingenious; but had it been a wholly disinterested one? If it could be proven it would, of course, exculpate himself and his colleagues from all censure in the matter of their diagnosis; but there seemed on the face of it to be insuperable difficulties in the path of such an hypothesis. One or the other of the two nurses must have been constantly on guard, and Miss Meade had scarcely left her sister's bedside. Not even she would have been permitted to change

the dressings; that could only have been done by Doctor Adams himself or the nurses—

The nurses! He made a mental note to learn all that he could about them at the earliest possible moment; but meanwhile the afternoon was advancing and much remained to be done before he reported to the captain of his bureau that night. Much that had occurred in the house of mystery that day had been inexplicable to him, and there were so many loose threads to be gathered together that he felt as if he were attempting to solve four problems at once. A score of questions were teeming in his brain, and not the least insistent of them was the significance of Gerda's hint about insanity.

When he reached the house Jane, who admitted him, informed him that the doctor had come and gone. He started toward the drawing-room but hearing the low murmur of voices paused.

"Who is here?" he asked.

"Oh, just Mr. Tad—Mr. Traymore, sir. The young gentleman who comes to see Miss Nan from next door," Jane simpered meaningly. "I'll call Miss Meade."

"No. Tell Miss Chalmers, the elder Miss Chalmers, that I would like to see her in the library at once, please."

"She's layin' down," Jane observed somewhat doubtfully. "She had hysterics all the morning and she told Gerda that she wasn't to be disturbed now by anybody."

"Take my message nevertheless." There was a sharp note of authority in his tone, and Jane scurried away.

The temperamental Miss Chalmers was not to be so easily bullied, however, and it was a good twenty minutes before she trailed languidly into the library with an air of

injured innocence. Her lower lip was thrust out sullenly and there was a gathering storm in her eyes, but the detective gave no heed.

"Sit down, please, Miss Chalmers," he began in a brisk, business-like way. "You informed your family last night at the dinner-table, I believe, that you were going to leave the house to-day. Why?"

"That is my own affair." She ignored the chair to which he had motioned and stood very straight before him. "I do not choose to discuss it."

"But I do. You will be good enough to reply to my questions or I shall be compelled to resort to stronger measures than this informal interview." He paused and then added: "The attitude which you are taking in this matter might be construed to signify that you did not wish the person who has made these attempts on the lives of your stepfather and your brother to be apprehended."

Cissie drew a deep, convulsive breath, and her little fists clenched.

"What do you mean?" she demanded through set teeth. "How dare you say such hateful things to me? I have nothing to tell you that would be of any help in your investigation; and I resent *your* attitude, your impertinence!"

Her voice was shaking now and the storm broke into tears of hurt pride.

"I am very sorry," Odell's tones were coolly ironical, "but my dear young lady, you will find the attitude of my superiors far more than impertinent if you compel me to take you before them."

She sniffed in disdain and dried her tears.

"You would not dare!" she scoffed. "If you tried to

charge me with knowing anything about the dreadful things that have been going on here—"

"I should bring no charge. You would merely be compelled to tell the truth. Your personal antagonism will not be permitted to interfere with the performance of my duty. Miss Chalmers, why did you announce your intention of leaving your home?"

"I didn't," she denied. "I said I would go and visit a girl friend for a few days; the atmosphere of this house had gotten on my nerves."

She spoke in a more subdued tone, but still sullenly.

"Then why did you tell your aunt this morning that you would not go near any of your friends and drag them into the notoriety of this case? Which was the falsehood, Miss Chalmers?"

"Neither. I—I changed my mind this morning, that is all."

"Where had you finally decided to go?"

Cissie hesitated and at length stammered:

"To—to a hotel. I would go anywhere to get away from this house. We are none of us safe here."

"Miss Chalmers, what precipitated your decision last night? Was it the outburst which your younger brother made at the table, the outburst in which he voiced the vague fears you had all entertained for the past week?"

"I suppose so," she shuddered. "It sounded so awful put into words. Of course, we are all dreadfully sorry for Rannie—you have heard that he is crippled?—and we try to be patient with his moods; but you haven't seen him, you don't know him, Sergeant Odell. He is so bitter, and his tongue is so ruthless, that you just can't have any real af-

fection for him. I know it must sound disloyal to speak so of one's own brother; but he doesn't care for anyone. His only pleasure is to torment and wound others. Last night father threatened again to have him put away in a sanitarium; and I wish he would. Aunt Effie is the only one who has opposed that."

"Miss Meade is very much attached to him?"

"Well, I suppose she ought to be." Cissie shrugged. "It is her fault that he is a cripple."

"Miss Meade's fault?" Odell asked casually.

"Yes." There was a little vindictive gleam in her round blue eyes. "She dropped him when he was a baby, and he became hunchbacked. She has simply idolized him ever since—remorse, I imagine—and spoiled him dreadfully. None of the rest of us have ever counted with her; and she'd go through fire and water for him."

"Why did your stepfather suggest placing him in a sanitarium? Is his mind affected?" Odell's tone was still casual, and his eyes appeared to be fastened upon the paperweight which he was balancing between his fingers, but in reality he was watching each changing expression of the girl's face.

"No; I would scarcely say that." She smiled scornfully. "He is quite the most brilliant member of the family, but his cleverness is all warped, somehow. Father meant a sanitarium for cripples out in the country; for Rannie is really an invalid, you know. He spends most of his time in bed, with Aunt Effie nursing him and submitting to his abuse. After last night's scene when he mocked us all I—I felt as if my nerves just wouldn't stand any more."

"You were saying much the same thing to your aunt in

the hall this morning, and when she stopped you she said she wished it had been you. What did she mean by that remark, Miss Chalmers?"

"That it had been me whom she dropped instead of Rannie, I imagine," Cissie flashed resentfully. "Aunt Effie is always like that when you say one word against Rannie."

"You say he is an invalid. Is he weak physically?"

"His spine troubles him a great deal at times, and he cannot walk very far; but he has tremendous strength in his hands and arms. He used to pinch us black and blue when he was in a temper as a child." Cissie halted suddenly, and when she spoke again there was a rising note of apprehension in her tones. "Why are you asking me all these questions about him, Sergeant Odell? Surely you don't suspect him of—of—"

"Do you, Miss Chalmers?" He shot the question at her; and she tossed her head indignantly, but not before he had seen her quail.

"Certainly not! How dare you insinuate such a thing! My brother a—a murderer? You must be mad!" Her voice rose shrilly and then broke, and she sank into her chair and covered her face with both hands. "Oh, I don't know what to think! Some one of us must know! I am afraid—afraid!"

CHAPTER X

IN THE PARROT'S CAGE

FOR some minutes after he had brought his interview with Miss Chalmers to a close Barry Odell tramped back and forth across the library-floor deep in thought. It was patent that the young woman had lied when she mentioned a hotel as her proposed destination that morning; yet there had been truth and a ring of desperation in her tone when she defied her aunt and declared that she had no intention of going near any of their friends. If Samuel Titheredge's tale of her infatuation for Farley Drew were based on fact it might have been her intention to go to him; but the detective knew that her reception had she done so would have meant a sad awakening for her.

Farley Drew might have been quite willing to marry a young girl of assured social position and comparative wealth even in these days of colossal fortunes; but to elope with her when the shadow of murder hung over her home, and notoriety of the most sinister sort loomed close, would have been an entirely different matter. Drew himself was traveling too close to the line just then, as the detective knew, to invite any publicity and place himself even indirectly in the path of the investigation.

He had not yet had an opportunity to examine the letters which he had appropriated from Gene's desk, but he had

detailed one of his men to keep a sharp look-out on that young gentleman's activities; trail him if he left the house, intercept any letter he might attempt to send, and record a possible telephone message. Perhaps he had already tried to communicate with Drew.

A discreet knock upon the library door interrupted his meditations, and he opened it to find Taylor, another of the men to whom he had assigned a special duty, confronting him.

"Jane told me you had got back, Sergeant, and I thought I had better report to you now if you've got time to hear me."

"Shut the door and fire away, Taylor." Odell seated himself once more. "You searched the servants' rooms first, as I directed?"

"Yes, sir. That butler must have changed from his livery into a plain suit; and Jane says that his derby hat, light overcoat, and a cane with a dog's head on it are missing. Everything is wide open in his room, none of the bureau drawers nor the trunk locked; and he left in such a hurry that he forgot his bank-book, although there is no check-book around."

"Have you the bank-book?"

"Here it is." Taylor handed him a thin tan book and a handful of letters, together with a page or two of papers upon which names and figures were arranged in a sort of chart.

Odell ran his eye down the columns in the bank-book first.

"Humph! He had over two thousand last spring, and his account has fluctuated since like a miniature stock-

market gone crazy," the detective commented. "He has drawn out two or three hundred at a clip and sometimes put back double the amount on the following day; but he's drawn out more than he has deposited in the long run. According to this, he has less than seven hundred left now."

Taylor grinned.

"Give a look at those papers and you will find the explanation for that, sir. The old bird played the races. The letters are all innocent enough. They are from that sister of his on Staten Island; and there isn't another thing in his room except clothes and a sporting magazine or two."

Odell glanced over a letter, noted that the rest were all in the same writing, and handed them back together with the bank-book and racing-charts.

"Put them back where you found them, Taylor; there's a chance that he will turn up yet of his own accord. Now tell me what you found in the other rooms."

"Nothing in Jane's room or the cook's that would interest you; and there was no grate or fireplace in any of the servants' rooms. Jane has a lot of cheap showy clothes and a stack of letters from a bunch of fellows, but they are all innocent enough. Marcelle has just a few letters written in a foreign language—French, I think—some books the same, and a rosary. She has mighty few clothes; but her room is the cleanest of the lot, and her bank-book shows four thousand dollars, all small deposits at a time and none drawn out. She's a thrifty soul, that Marcelle! I don't quite get this Gerda, though; the lady's maid."

"Why?"

"Well, her trunk and bag are cheap and unmarked but

new, as though she had just bought them before she came here, Sergeant; and there isn't a letter or scrap of paper in her room. I've been makin' up to Jane to get the dope, like I always do on a case of this kind; and she tells me that Gerda hasn't written a letter nor received one in all the six months she has been here. Now, I ask you, is that usual with servants?" Taylor leaned over the table the better to carry his point. "I've gone through the rooms of many of 'em but this is the first one I ever saw that didn't have a personal thing in it except just clothes and toilet articles all unmarked. The store tabs have even been taken out of the dresses and coats and hats. There's another thing strange about 'em, too; they're all dark and plain but they're fine quality, finer than any ordinary servant would appreciate or pay for; and the toilet articles are real ivory, or I'll eat my hat!"

"Sure you haven't been listening too much to Jane?" Odell looked quizzically at his subordinate. "She's got it in for Gerda and tried to make a mystery of her to me; but I've already interviewed the woman, and although she is a superior sort for a lady's maid her story is straight enough; she gave me a complete account of where she worked before and how she happened to get this place. Lay off her, Taylor; you'll draw a blank there."

It was no part of Odell's plan to have his henchmen get a line on the case and begin to speculate on their own account concerning it; they were there merely to carry out his orders and he would brook no self-appointed assistants as a matter of authority.

"Oh, all right," Taylor responded shortly. "Have it your own way, Sergeant; but if you ask me—"

"I didn't!" Odell interrupted sharply. "Where did you search next?"

"The young lady, the youngest one, was sitting with her father, so I had a chance to give her room the once over; but there was nothin' doin' there either. She has a coal-grate, but it was clean and polished." Taylor sat back somewhat sulkily in his chair, but he was careful to reply promptly. "Her desk was full of the things a young society girl usually keeps—invitations and theater programs and dance-cards and all that flummery. There were some letters of condolence, too, on the death of her mother and brother, and a bundle tied with a blue ribbon; lot of sentimental kid stuff and all of them signed 'Tad.'"

"I know all about that." Odell cast a glance toward the door. "Anything else?"

"High-brow books and a golf-bag, riding-breeches, and a Red-Cross uniform that's seen a lot of wear." Taylor's good-natured grin reasserted itself. "She must be a regular girl if she is a swell, that Miss Nan. There wasn't a thing locked in her room, either."

"Her room is on the third floor opposite Mr. Chalmers's, isn't it? Did you see Porter?"

"I didn't see him but I heard him." Taylor's grin expanded into a chuckle. "Mr. Gene must have seen him on guard and invited him in, for from what I heard outside the door they were playin' 'rum' together and Porter had about mortgaged his next three months' pay to the young gentleman!"

Odell did not smile. He felt that he had taken Gene's measure to the weak, snobbish soul of him; and if he had

stooped to fraternize with a plainclothesman there was some ulterior motive behind it. Porter was not easily taken in, but Odell resolved to caution him nevertheless.

"I went down to the second floor, but I couldn't disturb Mr. Lorne of course; and the old lady, Miss Meade, was in her room. Just then Miss Chalmers—Miss Cissie, as Jane calls her—came out like a whirlwind, slammed her door, and went off down the back stairs clicking her heels at every step as if she were mad clear through; and I took a peep into her room!" Taylor threw up both hands. "Lace and ribbons, perfume and powder, and all in a hopeless jumble. It'd take a day to go through it properly; but I steered straight for the only thing I could find locked up, a little drawer in her vanity dresser. The only things I found in it after I got it open were these notes, a box of cigarettes, a bottle of medicine, and a little round jar of rouge. Looks like the young lady was tryin' to learn to be a sport on the quiet. There was a grate in her room, too; but it was as clean as the one in her sister's. The notes are all in the same handwriting, you see, and all as proper as you please; but this one taken in connection with the bottle of medicine I found in the drawer looks kind of"—Taylor recalled his late rebuke and shrugged. "Oh, well, judge for yourself, sir."

He placed the notes before Odell upon the table and pointed out one of them as he spoke. A glance sufficed to show the detective that they were, as Taylor had said, in the same writing; and that writing was the unmistakable hand of Farley Drew, whose letters to Gene were now reposing in Odell's pocket. He picked up the note indicated and read:

"DEAR PRINCESS GOLDILOCKS:

"I send with this the magic potion to drive away that sleeplessness of which you told me. It is quite harmless, really, but don't take more at a time than I told you. I dare not say what I wish your dreams may be, but I am sure they will be pleasant ones. May I hope to see you to-morrow at the Landis'?

"Ever faithfully,

"FARLEY."

Odell folded the note and put it into his pocket with the others.

"What was that bottle of medicine you found in the drawer, Taylor?" he asked.

"It was labeled 'extract of camomilla,' but I've seen and smelled and tasted chloral before. A fine little habit to start a young girl on! I didn't bring it down to you, but if you want it I'll slip in the first chance I get—"

"No, don't disturb it as long as you're sure of its contents; but get in when the opportunity offers and put back these notes in the drawer. Is that all?"

Taylor hesitated, and his expression changed.

"Well, no, Sergeant. When I came out of that room just a few minutes ago I heard the most unearthly screechin' and chatterin' goin' on behind a closed door across the hall; and then somebody said quite distinctly over and over as if they were bragging about it: 'Nobody knows how strong I am. Nobody knows how strong I am.' It was a queer voice, and I stopped to listen. After it kept that up for a while it changed and began to whimper like a kid fretting. 'Hot,' it repeated again and again. 'Hot. It burns.'

"I knocked, meaning to ask a fool question as an excuse just to see who was talking, and the same voice called 'come in'; so I opened the door. There, right facin' me was a big parrot's cage with the blame bird in it hangin' upside down first from one foot and then from the other, and twistin' its neck around so as to stare at me. It was a man's room all right, with a bunch of neckties hangin' on a rack by the dresser and a collar-box and military brushes in plain sight. I didn't notice any fireplace or grate. The head of the bed was hidden by the open door, but the foot of it looked smooth; and I never thought anyone was there.

"I started to walk over to the parrot's cage when a high whining voice behind me made me turn in a hurry; and there all curled up in a knot on the bed, as high up on the pillows as he could get, was a hunchback, grinnin' at me with a mean twisted kind of a smile.

"I don't mind tellin' you, Sergeant, that it gave me a turn; for though Jane had said somethin' about young Mr. Chalmers bein' crippled I didn't expect anythin' like that. He's got a face—but wait till you see him. I backed up to the door, apologizin' as well as I could; but he pulled himself up in bed and asked if I was Sergeant Odell. I said 'no,' that I was just one of your men. I could see then that he was only a kid, about seventeen or eighteen, but he looks as old as the world.

"He asked in a kind of a mockin' way if we'd made up our minds yet who the practical joker was that had dropped the picture on his brother and thrown his stepfather downstairs; and when I said 'no' again, he laughed in a shrill cackle like an old woman, and the parrot imitated him. I got out of that room as soon as I could, and I met Jane at

the foot of the servants' staircase. She told me you were here, and I thought I'd report, as I've finished the job you gave me, all but Miss Meade's room and Mr. Lorne's and Mr. Gene's."

"How about Kelly and Smith?"

Taylor grinned once more.

"Kelly's down in the cellar diggin' in the coal for those tools you told him to find; he's looked everywhere else. Smith's down in the kitchen tryin' out his correspondence-school French on the cook. Gerda wouldn't give him a look!"

"Well, go and cultivate Jane, and see if you can get any dope out of her along the lines I told you this morning. Work on her fears and discount her imagination, and you'll soon have every detail of the past week from her point of view. I'm going now to have a little talk with Randall Chalmers."

As he went slowly up the back stairs Odell mentally listed the data which Taylor's search of the rooms had revealed. The most significant point seemed to be Gerda's strange aloofness not only from the other members of the household but from the world in general, and her efforts to efface all record of the past and render it as difficult as possible for her identity to be traced back farther than the day she had entered the house, as evidenced by her care in removing even the tabs from her clothing.

Yet she had willingly enough volunteered information that morning as to where she had worked previously, and it was improbable that the late Mrs. Lorne would have taken into her service, particularly in such an intimate position

as that of lady's maid, a woman of whose past record and references she had not satisfied herself.

Leaving the problem for future meditation, Odell walked softly along the hall and paused before Randall Chalmers's door. From behind it there came to him the raucous voice of the parrot raised once more in the same whimpering plaint which Taylor had heard: "Hot. It burns."

He knocked upon the door.

"Come in," a whining voice called irascibly; and the detective entered.

The bed was empty but upon the couch was curled a hunchbacked figure clad in a grotesquely patterned bathrobe. Odell was conscious of a pair of flashing black eyes staring at him from behind a disordered shock of long dark hair, and of thin lips drawn into an indescribable leer. Yet the detective's tones were curiously gentle when he spoke.

"Sorry to intrude upon you, Mr. Chalmers; but I know you'll help me if you can, and when I tire you just tell me to go away. I'm Odell."

He had struck the right note, and his primary object was achieved; for the boy pulled himself up on his pillows with an air of suddenly awakened interest and pushed the hair back from his eyes.

"And what makes you think I can help you?" he demanded bruskly but with the habitual whine temporarily banished from his tones.

"Well, for one thing, you certainly hit the nail on the head last night at dinner, you know." Odell's smile robbed the words of any offensive significance. "Your family were laboring under what we might call a hunch, I suppose; but

you were the first to realize that it was a feeling of fear and suspense held in common among you all and to give voice to it. I fancy you are rather given to studying the people around you, digging under the surface, for your own amusement perhaps; and that's why I've come to you."

"Amusement? Good Lord, do you think it's amusing to find out that your family are a pack of hypocritical—". The boy broke off suddenly, his thin, sallow, claw-like hands clenched. "I've had nothing else to do but study them, hang it. I know them all backward, like a fellow who's marooned on some desert island with a few books by indifferent authors."

Odell nodded understandingly.

"I know. That's just why I've come to you. I haven't had time to read these books, you see; and I must know their contents quickly or another of them may be permanently closed."

He had continued the boy's metaphor, and the latter lay for some moments staring fixedly at him with no change of expression. Then gradually the sneering smile vanished as if a hand had passed across his lips.

"Another of them?" he repeated. "Gene got off scot-free, and Dad with only his arm and a rib or two out of commission. You must mean—"

"That your fears were well founded? I am afraid so." Odell's tone was studiously callous. "That's the trouble with people when they start murder on a large scale; success makes them too confident, too impatient. These tragic accidents which have occurred under this roof might have passed unsuspected for what they seemed on the surface to be; but they came too close together. The coincidence

impressed itself upon all your minds; and when you brought matters to a head last night you precipitated the later events."

"Mother and Julian," the boy breathed but without audible emotion; his tone suggested rather a grim confirmation. "So you got it, did you, Sergeant? I've known it all along; and when the rest talked about fate and coincidence I could have laughed at their smug blindness!"

"How did you know?" the detective asked coolly.

"How do you know someone is staring at you in a crowd when your back is turned?" He twisted uneasily upon the couch. "What makes you conscious of another's presence sometimes when they've entered without a sound? I knew it, that's all. Even before Julian's death I was waiting; I have felt as though there was someone else in the house, another personality hiding behind a familiar one—but all this must sound like rot to you."

"By no means." Odell seated himself where he could see every changing expression on that dark, saturnine, strangely old face. "We know, you and I, that there is someone in this household who if not the prime mover in this series of events is at least an accomplice. You can't shut your eyes to that fact."

"I don't want to, Sergeant," the boy retorted grimly. "You say that when I brought matters to a head last night I precipitated the attacks upon Gene and Dad. That presupposes the idea that someone at the dinner-table is guilty. It is rather a rotten thing for a fellow to face, but at any cost this damnable business has got to stop! After all, it is only what has been in the back of my head for more than a week. The devil of it is that I can't see any motive, nor,

well as I think I know the family and small as my regard is for most of them, could I believe any one of them capable of conceiving and carrying out such a scheme.

"Gene is too weak and cowardly for one—you see I am perfectly frank with you. The girls are out of it, I'm sure; Nan's only a serious-minded kid, and Cissie is a selfish, calculating little beast, but there is nothing of the potential murderess in her make-up. Aunt Effie is afraid of her own shadow, and she wouldn't hurt a mouse; while as for Dad —well, he worshiped mother, and her death nearly killed him; so if all these accidents were the work of one person that lets him out. Moreover, he wouldn't have deliberately thrown himself downstairs to avert a suspicion which didn't even exist; nor did he have an opportunity last night, as far as I can learn, to tamper with that top step. Old Sam Titheredge stayed overnight and shared his room."

There was something—a touch of cynicism, the shadow of a sneer—in the boy's tone which made Odell scan his face more closely, but he merely asked:

"And the servants?"

"Peters is a pompous old fool, and I think he has only beaten it because he is scared stiff; Marcelle is stupid and shrewd at the same time, like so many of the peasant class in France, but she's loyal and crazy about all of us. Jane is a blockhead; and Gerda—well, what do you think of Gerda yourself, Sergeant?"

A suggestion of that significant cunning smile played once more about his bloodless lips as he put the question; and the detective replied noncommittally:

"She appears to be a very superior sort of maid."

The boy chuckled dryly.

"Cagey, aren't you? Not that I blame you; I suppose I'm under suspicion myself along with the rest. And the opinions I've expressed to you of my family aren't exactly dutiful; are they? The fact is that I have no more use for any of them than they have for me, and plain speaking is one of the few indulgences left to me. Aunt Effie is the only one who hasn't treated me ever since I can remember as though I were some sort of blight on the family. Not that I'm looking for sympathy." The black eyes flashed. "I'm not trying to make out a brief for myself, Sergeant; but I wouldn't take the trouble to put any of them out of the way."

Despite the callous words Odell felt a certain sympathy for the pitiful, repulsive creature lying there; for beneath the bitter contempt he read the underlying resentment of the boy's lonely, proud spirit. Warped though his mentality might be by constant brooding over his infirmity, there had been a ring of sincerity in his tone, and the detective responded quickly:

"I do not think that you would. But about Gerda; your mother was quite satisfied with her services, was she not? Liked her, in fact?"

"I suppose so or she would not have kept her along. What's the idea, Sergeant? Think her a bit above her place? She may be; but if she has any ulterior motive in being here, you can take it from me it is not for the purpose of exterminating us."

Could he have spoken from knowledge? Was there a mystery within a mystery in this strange household? In the presence of this weirdly precocious lad the detective experienced again that same sense of bafflement which had

attacked him more than once since he took hold of the case, as if a door had suddenly been shut in his face.

Rannie had turned his head away and closed his eyes as if to indicate that as far as he was concerned the interview was over, and Odell rose.

"Well, I won't bother you any more now; and I'll see that my men do not. I understand that one of them blundered in a while ago."

"No. Old Socks here, short for Socrates, you know, invited him in. Didn't you, old boy?"

He nodded toward the parrot's cage, and the bird still hanging upside down ruffled its feathers and remarked dolorously:

"It burns."

"What is he talking about?" Odell walked over to the cage and poked a tentative finger between the bars.

"Look out, he'll give you a nasty nip," Rannie warned. "He doesn't like strangers—well, what do you know about that?"

The parrot had hooded his eyes in speculative fashion, shifted his feet, and finally sidled over and presented his head to be scratched. For a full minute Odell stood there with his back to the couch, his eyes traveling swiftly over the cage and its inmate. Then he turned and nodding casually to Rannie started for the door.

"Wise old bird," he commented.

"You'll drop in and let me know how you get on?" the boy asked almost eagerly.

Odell promised, and closing the door softly behind him he went downstairs. The last two minutes in the invalid's room had served to dash to chaos all his previous calcula-

tions, vague though they had been; and the fog of mystery which encompassed him seemed to have deepened to a solid, impenetrable wall.

It was the parrot which had furnished him with the last and most conflicting clue. Neither the birl's whimpering plaint nor its suspended position in the cage was without reason. On the detective's first approach to the bird he had observed that its upturned feet were both badly blistered. The rods upon which it habitually stood had not been replaced in their supports, but lay on a table close by; and the sliding tray which formed the bottom of the cage was charred black.

His first thought was that the boy in sheer love of cruelty might have been torturing his pet, but a closer inspection had revealed amidst the gravel with which the tray had been lightly sprinkled a few blackened slivers of wood.

Gene Chalmers had told the truth. The sawdust had not been burned in his grate but in the tray from the parrot's cage, and the ashes later placed where they were found.

CHAPTER XI

THE VOICE

CAPTAIN LEWIS looked up with a grin as Odell entered the bureau at Police Headquarters that evening and sank into a chair beside the big desk.

"I thought there must be something doing when you 'phoned down for eight of the boys to-day," he commented. "What's going on at the Meade house?"

"Murder," responded Odell succinctly. "Systematic murder on a bigger scale than this city has known for years, and an inside job. Someone is trying to wipe out the whole family, Captain; and I have struck a million clues and no motive. In all the five years I have been on your staff I've never seen anything to equal this case."

The captain gave a low whistle.

"Murder, eh? Sure of it, Odell?"

"Does a man cut his own throat by accident, severing the jugular vein; drop his razor, grope around with bloody hands to save himself, and then before he dies hunt for that razor so that he shall be found with it in his hand?" demanded the detective. "You know how young Julian Chalmers was supposed to have died last week. I have proof that someone took his razor from him, cut his throat with it, and then slipped it back into his hand as he lay dead; but they didn't take into consideration the fact that

the marks of *both* his hands in blood were upon the side of the bathtub."

"You can prove that?"

"Two reliable witnesses. Moreover, I'm convinced that his mother, Mrs. Richard Lorne, was also murdered not a month before."

"Mrs. Lorne died of blood-poisoning."

"Yes. By poison with which she was deliberately if indirectly infected."

Odell gave his chief a detailed description of the case as he had learned it from the physicians, and demonstrated once more his discovery of the substitution of the needle; and the captain's skeptical manner changed.

"Good work, Odell!" he exclaimed. "Your proof is more conclusive in the instance of young Chalmers's death than in his mother's; but it is circumstantial enough in that alone to warrant a thorough investigation. I'll see the Chief Medical examiner to-night and arrange for an autopsy at once. We'll have to keep a soft pedal on the press, though, and go slow on this 'inside job' stuff until we have the dope. The Meades are an influential old family and Lorne has big money interests back of him. Did you get an interview with each of them?"

"All except the youngest daughter and Lorne himself; but I saw them both for a moment. Any news of that butler, Peters?"

"Not yet, but I'm having his sister's house watched. What was that you handed me over the 'phone this morning about two attempts having been made upon the lives of two members of the family within the last twenty-four hours?"

The detective told his story from the inquiries which he and Titheredge had made at the carpenter's shop concerning the mysterious telephone message to the conclusion of his interview with Randall Chalmers and the discovery in the parrot's cage; and after he had finished the captain sat for a while in silence.

"Well, let's say that you have established proof of the murder of Julian Chalmers and the attempted murder of his brother and of Richard Lorne," he remarked at last. "You have also strong circumstantial evidence of the murder of Mrs. Lorne; and it all points to an inside job. I think for the time being we can drop Miss Meade and the two young ladies out of it; that leaves Lorne himself, the two Chalmers boys, and the four servants. What do you make of that cripple?"

"He has abnormally long arms, and hands like talons; and his attitude toward his family shows that he is lacking in moral sense to a certain degree, provided this utter callousness of his isn't a pose. I admit he has me guessing," Odell replied frankly. "He's only a kid, yet he talks like an old man; and his brain is keen if it is warped. Now, these two attempted crimes, like the two already accomplished, show remarkable ingenuity coupled with a carelessness in execution in each case that would seem to mark them as the conception of a mind that was erratic, to say the least; and the hacked picture-wires and sawed step of the stairs would both have required strength of no mean order. The hint that maid Gerda tried to give me, too, about insanity sticks in my mind. Who could she have meant but that boy?

"There is the sawdust, also. When I first examined the

stairs I saw that it had all been carefully removed except a few flecks, and I started on a still hunt to find out what had been done with it. I discovered the ashes as you know in Gene Chalmers's fireplace, but I wasn't satisfied. Wood-ashes smudge, but paper ashes form just a fluff; and the grate was too clean. That's why I set Taylor the task of examining the fireplaces in the other rooms; but he found no trace.

"It's evident that whoever wanted to get rid of them had to do it in a hurry, and for some reason couldn't or didn't dare use a grate. There is none in the hunchback's room; but there was that metal tray in the bottom of the parrot's cage, which could be and undoubtedly was used to burn the sawdust on.

"The proceeding was so hurried, however, that the sawdust was not entirely burned. The tray wasn't cleaned, and it was returned to the cage so hot that it blistered the parrot's feet. Then the ashes of the sawdust were dumped in Gene's grate."

"Exactly. To throw suspicion upon him," the captain commented. "So that's the case against the hunchback as far as it goes?"

"I'm not so sure," Odell demurred thoughtfully. "You've heard of what these criminologist sharks on the other side call the elementary and secondary mind, haven't you, Captain?"

His superior grunted.

"You know what I think of all that bunk," he said non-committally.

"Well, those are only terms used to classify the different degrees of cleverness on the part of the criminal, anyway."

Odell's diplomacy came to his aid. "If someone else had burned that sawdust and put the ashes in Gene's grate to throw suspicion on him it wouldn't have taken much mental effort; would it? But if Gene himself had burned it in the tray from the bottom of the cage in Randall's room, purposely put back the tray uncleaned to leave the evidence, and then emptied the ashes into his own grate to make it look as if his brother were guilty and trying to incriminate him, that would show scheming of a rather higher order; wouldn't it?"

"What are you trying to put over, Odell?" demanded the captain. "Got anything on this Gene that you haven't told me about? From what I gather he is a kind of a weak-kneed but harmless young pup; and he certainly wouldn't have cut the wires of that portrait almost through and then sat under it and waited for it to fall on him."

"Weakness directed by a stronger and more evil personality may very easily develop into viciousness, all the more dangerous because in a moment of action it would be backed by the desperation of panic," the detective remarked. "I'm not trying to preach, Captain; you know yourself that the strong-minded crooks are the easiest to handle in the long run. We haven't any proof that Gene Chalmers ever sat for an instant under that portrait at the desk last night. The ladies and Randall had retired, and the only persons near were Lorne and his attorney in the next room with a heavy door closed between.

"What was to prevent that young man from cutting the wires of the portrait with the electric file—I have it on the authority of an expert that such an instrument makes only a low buzzing sound, and it is quite possible that it would

not be heard through the massive walls of that old-fashioned house—waiting until he saw that it was about to come down and then going in on some flimsy excuse about one of the letters to his stepfather and the attorney in order to establish the fact of his narrow escape?

"I admit that I do not believe him capable of conceiving such a plan; but if the details were drilled into him by someone else and the incentive strong enough, I am convinced that he could carry it out. Do you remember my telling you about some letters that I took from his desk after I had interrupted him in his task of burning them? I have them here and they will recall someone to you whom we have been trying to get for a long time."

Captain Lewis took the letters, glanced over them, frowned at the signature, and at last brought his mighty fist down resoundingly on the desk.

"Farley Drew! So he had his hooks into that lad too, did he?"

"Not only Gene, but the other brother also, I understand; the one who is dead. There is a certain note here in particular that I want you to read."

Odell selected the one which he had first hurriedly scanned in Gene's room that morning and laid it before his chief.

"'Where do you think you get off—in too deep—meant you should be—mother's went off without a hitch—got to be done by the sixth—mean business—Farley Drew.'" The captain skimmed it hastily aloud and glanced up at his subordinate. "It is coercion, of course, perhaps blackmail, but what has it to do—"

"Gene's mother was already dead when that note was

written, as you can tell if you look at the postmark, and that reference to the sixth may mean anything; it just happens, however, that that was the date on which Julian Chalmers was killed."

"Great Jehoshaphat!" Captain Lewis almost leaped from his chair. "The Assistant D. A. has tried to get him in more than one vice clean-up but we never thought we could hang a thing like this on him! I'll have him down here to-night and sweat him out. Anything in the rest of these notes of a threatening nature?"

"No. They are merely to make or break appointments," Odell smiled. "Don't be too sure of landing your bird here to-night, Captain."

His superior, who had just pressed a button on his desk, turned to him with a muttered exclamation very like an oath.

"You don't mean that he's beaten it?" he demanded. "Did that Gene get away from your man and warn him?"

"On the contrary, Gene has made no move to communicate with him in any way since I started the investigation. That is why I am quite certain that he managed in some manner to reach him either last night or early this morning and caution him that Lorne and the attorney had decided to call us in," Odell explained. "He lives at the Bellemonde Annex up near the park, but I don't believe you will find him at home this evening."

Nevertheless the captain issued a curt order to the plainclothesman who appeared in obedience to the summons, and then turned once more to Odell.

"Couldn't you get anything out of the boy himself; this Gene?"

"No; and the weakest of all the weak spots in this skeleton of a theory of mine is that I cannot believe him capable of having had any part in the death of his mother. I told you of the quarrel between himself and his brother on the last night of Julian's life, which the cook overheard; and it is just possible that they may have had a struggle with that razor in the early morning; but I don't think he would have had nerve enough to go immediately afterward to join the others at the breakfast-table and wait for discovery to come." The detective shook his head. "As a case, it is full of holes any way you look at it; and yet there is that coincidence of the date, the sixth.

"There is another thing, too. Conspicuous upon Gene's dressing-table is a silver photograph-frame, empty. And when in the course of my questioning I asked him if he and his brother got on well together he flushed, and his eyes flew to that frame; but he looked away again quickly when he was conscious that I had noticed the glance. Titheredge told me that part of the trouble between Julian and his stepfather over money matters was caused by his infatuation for a woman; and Marcelle when she listened to the brothers' quarrel that night heard Gene call Julian a thief.

"Now, there are other precious things that can be stolen besides those which have money value; love, for instance. If a young man keeps an ornate photograph frame upon his dressing-table it usually contains the picture of the object of his present regard; but when that frame is empty it might be that he had destroyed the picture in a moment of jealous rage but kept the frame there as a reminder of his injury. Gene is the sullen sort who would hug misery, real or fancied, to his bosom and nurse revenge. If he had been

crazy about some girl and his brother had taken her from him, it would have been a strong enough motive to at least cause a resumption of the quarrel in the early morning."

"You're trying to convince yourself, Odell," the captain accused him.

"I am trying to find among the tangible clues which I have gathered and from the score of curious, possibly significant things which I observed in that strange household to-day, a single thread that will lead to the truth."

"What curious things?" asked the captain.

"Why is that woman Gerda occupying so menial a position when she is obviously far above it? What did she mean by that veiled hint about insanity? What does the hunchback Rannie know about her? These questions may all be beside the point at issue; yet I feel that in some way they are connected with it, although there is no place for them in the theory that Gene knows anything about the events of the past twenty-four hours, to say nothing of being implicated in his brother's death." Odell rose and began to pace the floor of the office as if the mental struggle within him required some physical expression. "Why did Peters run away? Who telephoned the carpenter to send someone to hang the portrait before it had fallen? Who does Cissie Chalmers fear? Is it Rannie; and if so has she any reason for that fear other than her very evident dislike of him?"

"It looks like a queer tangle, all right," his superior admitted. "You've done a good bit for one day, Odell. After the autopsy on Mrs. Lorne—"

"That can only prove what we know already or else leave us where we are now. Even if there is a negative result, which is almost a foregone conclusion, it cannot disprove

the fact that she was poisoned; for Doctor McCutchen himself said there was no trace of poison discoverable in her blood-cultures, yet he is as convinced as I am of the truth." Odell turned suddenly and faced his superior. "The thing that gets me is that the guilty person is there beneath that roof, talked with me to-day, was within reach of my hand; and yet I was helpless to accuse. It is maddening! I've practically proved the fact of two murders and two attempted ones; I have the sawdust ashes, the pieces of filed wire, and the substituted needle for direct tangible clues; and I'm up against a stone wall. No motive, no slightest inkling as to the identity of the murderer, and yet among the ten people who make up that household the solution lies."

"One of the ten has skipped out, remember," Captain Lewis remarked. "When we lay our hands on Peters—"

A knock upon the door interrupted him, and at his impatient growl a subordinate entered. When the chief saw who the newcomer was he half rose from his chair.

"You've got him?"

"Yes, sir," the man chuckled. "Caught him just as he was trying to sneak into his sister's house. He's outside; shall I bring him in?"

At the captain's emphatic nod he withdrew, and the former turned to Odell.

"Peters!" he exclaimed with immense satisfaction. "Perhaps you'll get something more to work on now. If he isn't willing to come across with what he knows watch me make him."

But it was a wilted and wholly abject Peters who stumbled over the threshold and collapsed into the chair opposite the chief. He panted like a frightened rabbit, and

his flabby jowls had lost their ruddiness and turned a pasty grayish hue.

"You're Peters, butler up at the Meade house?"

"George Peters; yes, sir." His tones quavered.

"Peters, what did you run away for this morning?"

There was a pause, and the butler passed a trembling hand across his face.

"I don't know, sir. I—I've just been wandering around all day. I—that house—I couldn't stand it any longer."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the two deaths in the family, sir; and then the falling picture, and the men that were sent for to hang it again before any human being could know it was going to fall! I'd have stood by the family through thick and thin; but there are some things no mortal can face." His hands were clenching and unclenching on his plump knees. "When—when a person cannot sit down without having something fall on him, or step on the stairs without being flung to the bottom, to say nothing of what—what had gone before, it's rank suicide to stay in such a house."

Captain Lewis turned to Odell with a gesture of relinquishment, and the latter took up the interrogation.

"When did you first get the impression that there was something uncanny going on, Peters?"

The butler hesitated.

"Well, sir, when I found poor Mr. Julian's body—"

"No," the detective interrupted bruskly. The moment of hesitation had been too significant. "I mean before that. What was it that first made you think there was something happening which you couldn't understand?"

"How did you know, sir?" Peters's jaw dropped. "I

thought nobody heard it but me. You mean the voice—the voice the night Mrs. Lorne died?"

The captain's chair creaked as he shifted his weight suddenly, but Odell merely nodded.

"Well, you see, sir, it was this way. We all knew by then that the mistress couldn't live; for Jane had heard one of the doctors, the last called in it was, tell Mr. Lorne so, and we were all upset, as you might know; for she was a—a rare lovely lady, sir, and a kind, good mistress. My room is on the fourth floor front, just over Mr. Julian's; and there was nothing above me but the trunk and storerooms. I stayed up till midnight to see if I would be wanted, and then Miss Meade told me to go to bed; but I couldn't sleep though Marcelle and Jane and Gerda had long since quieted down.

"Of course, Miss Nan and Mr. Julian and Mr. Gene didn't go to bed all night; so there wasn't any sound except the church clock near striking the hours, and now and then a snore from Marcelle across the hall. It was after four o'clock, almost five, I guess, when a thin little thread of light came in under my door and traveled across the floor, and then went out again. I couldn't believe my eyes, for there hadn't been the sound of a footfall outside and I couldn't see what anybody would be doing with a light up there in our quarters at that hour; but I jumped out of bed and opened my door a crack very softly so as to make no noise.

"I couldn't see anything, not a ray of the light which had shone under my door; but I heard a voice that seemed to come from somewhere in the air, and there—there wasn't anything human about it!"

The butler paused, and drawing a handkerchief from his pocket he wiped his pallid face, down which the sweat had started. He was staring wide-eyed into space, and his breath rasped in his throat.

"What did it say?" Odell asked.

Peters shuddered.

"I feel as if it was calling down a curse on me to repeat it, sir; but I'll never forget it to the longest day I live. It said: 'The first one gone! So shall they all go, one by one!' That was all; but it started me shaking like a leaf, and I didn't need anyone to tell me that poor Mrs. Lorne had passed away. I shut my door somehow and got to the side of my bed and sat down, straining my ears to listen for the sound of a footstep; but none came nor did that light show under my door again. I must have sat there for a good twenty minutes, for finally the clock in the church outside struck five; and in the morning they told me that Mrs. Lorne had died at twenty-five minutes to five."

"What did that voice sound like?" Odell spoke quickly, for the butler seemed to be upon the verge of collapse.

"It was low and more like a whisper, but clear and full of a horrid sort of joy as if the Thing, whatever it was, was gloating over what had happened. I—I haven't been the same since; for I keep hearing it in my ears all the time." Peters suddenly buried his face in his hands and sobbed aloud. "God help me, I hear it now."

CHAPTER XII

THE ROOM WITH THE BROKEN WINDOW

REALIZING that nothing further could be gotten from the nerve-racked man that night the chief at a nod from Odell ordered that Peters be taken away.

"What do you make of it? Hysteria or just plain lies?" he asked when the door had closed behind the limp, shambling form.

"Neither," Odell replied slowly. "I should not be surprised to learn that he was telling the straight truth."

"Truth!" Captain Lewis exploded. "Are you going to tell me next that you believe in ghosts, Barry Odell?"

"I believe in the one Peters heard, and I'm going to make it my business to find it," the detective responded gravely. "I think it will help mightily in the solution of the whole problem to learn just what it was doing in the upper regions of the house at the moment when the family, or the *rest* of the family, were plunged in their first numbing shock and grief."

"Well, it sounds fishy to me," the chief asserted. "If it were the murderer why should he go wandering around the house with a light talking to himself? Peters's story is thin, too; the atmosphere of the house didn't seem to get on his nerves to the extent of making him sneak away from it until he knew we were going to start an investigation. I'll let

him sleep over it to-night, but in the morning I'll put him through the jumps. Well, Miller?"

After a light tap the door had opened, and the plain-clothes detective who had been sent to bring in Farley Drew stood upon the threshold with failure written on his countenance.

"He's not there, sir. When I asked at the desk for Mr. Drew the clerk 'phoned up to his rooms and someone answered that he was out of town. Then I showed my shield and they sent me up with a bellboy. Of course, the clerk may have telephoned a warning while we were in the elevator; but I don't think he did for when we rang the valet opened the door promptly, and he looked a good deal surprised but not alarmed. He said that Mr. Drew went away early this morning to some house party in the country, but he couldn't say where as he'd had no instructions about forwarding mail. Mr. Drew seldom left an address when he was only to be away for a few days. The valet, Sims his name is, had packed dress clothes, a Norfolk hunting-suit, and tennis-flannels in the bags which our bird took away with him; and he understood that Drew would not be back for a week."

"Is that all you got?" the chief asked disgustedly.

"Not quite, sir. By luck I found the chauffeur outside at the taxi-stand who had driven him to the station; the Grand Central it was. He knew Drew and had often driven him before; and he said that he was in a devil of a hurry to catch his train this morning. It looked straight enough to me."

"All right; that'll do." As the door closed once more the

chief turned to Odell. "It seems as though you had the right dope; Drew must have had word from that Chalmers lad and beaten it, and that adds more color to your theory. If he isn't mixed up in this thing he would have stuck around and played the friend of the family and braved it out."

Odell rose.

"I've got to get a line on him and I won't call it a day until I have," he announced. "It's only ten o'clock; I'll go back to the Meade house and have it out with Gene."

He had started for the door when the telephone on the captain's desk whirred and instinctively he waited.

"Yes.—Who?—Oh, it's you, is it, Porter? . . . The sergeant? Yes, he's here."

Odell sprang forward and seized the receiver.

"Hello, Porter. Where are you 'phoning from?"

"Is that you, Sergeant?" Porter fairly yelped with excitement. "I'm talking from the booth in Volkert's drug store over on Third Avenue; you know the place, we had him up a couple of months ago for selling 'snow.'"

"What are you doing there?" demanded the exasperated Odell. "I left you to watch Gene Chalmers. The last I heard of you, you were playing cards with him."

"Yes, and he rooked me," Porter retorted. "I'm trailing him now. He's just across the street in a tailor's shop next the corner; it was all closed and dark but he let himself in with a key. There is only one entrance unless he goes out some back way, and I don't believe he will, for he thinks he lost me at the house. He's a slick guy for fair."

"Keep your eye on that shop till I get there," ordered

Odell. "If he comes out shadow him but 'phone back here to Headquarters the first chance you get so that I can follow you. Get me?"

"Sure, Sergeant."

There came the almost simultaneous click of two receivers, and Odell turned to his chief.

"Can I have Miller? I've a hunch we'll need him; Gene Chalmers thinks he has given Porter the slip, and he is over on Third Avenue in some joint that has a shop in front for a blind. I rather think there will be developments."

With the readily accorded permission he and Miller taxied swiftly uptown, dismissing the car a block from their destination. Most of the shops were closed; but the avenue was still brightly lighted, and as they approached the drug store they could distinguish Porter's short, stocky figure leaning nonchalantly against the lamp-post at the curb.

As they neared him he turned and greeted them boisterously in the tough language of the quarter for the benefit of any chance passer-by, then drew them around the corner.

"Look back over your shoulder," he said in low, hurried tones. "See that shop between the delicatessen and the tobacconist's? That's the joint. Gene Chalmers hasn't come out yet and no one else has gone in; but it must be some sort of a meeting-place."

"What is that narrow open space around the corner on the side street, back of the tobacconist's?" Odell queried. "Looks like a sort of alley to me. Miller, go and see if it runs back of the tailor's shop and if there is a door opening on it. Look for any lights in the rear and be careful if there is anyone hanging about."

As Miller nodded to them carelessly and sauntered across

the avenue Porter observed with grudging admiration in his tones:

"I thought that Gene was just a willie-boy but I had the wrong dope; he's about as slick as they come. I thought at first that he was too blamed affable when he invited me into his room, but he seemed so anxious to tell me all about how that picture nearly fell on him the night before and ready to offer a hundred different suggestions that he threw me off the track; and boy! how he can play cards! Not that I took my hand off my number for a minute until just at the last," he added hastily. "But you yourself might have been taken in by the way he worked that, Sergeant."

"Possibly," Odell assented dryly. "I tried to get word to you before I left the house to warn you against that very thing; but you didn't come down to report and I let you alone to handle the case your own way. How did he manage to give you the slip?"

"It was after dinner and he wanted a drink; said that his stepfather had some private stock locked away in the cellar, but he had a duplicate key which the old man had given him. I had my suspicions as to how he had come by that key; but it was none of my business so I went down cellar with him. There were stone steps and a flat door bolted on the inside leading up into the back yard, and a small room partitioned off where he said the liquor was stored.

"He turned on the electric light by a switch in the wall near the staircase, took a key from his pocket, and opened the door of the store-room. I strolled after him to take a peep inside when he called to me to look on one of the hanging shelves that were full of preserve-jars and find a

glass." Porter hesitated. "I suppose I was a fool, but I never suspected he had a chance in the world to make a break for it then; so I turned to do as he asked, when the lights went out like a flash, and I heard the door of the store-room slam. I groped my way to it but it was fastened by a spring lock and by the time I found the switch in the wall and turned on the lights again Shaw blew his whistle outside.

"There must have been a second light-switch in the store-room and a second door leading up into the yard; and the kid had evidently planned his getaway ahead, for he's wearing a cloth cap, which I guess he had been carrying folded up in an inside pocket since before I came on the job. I ran out of the house, found Blake on guard at the corner, and he told me young Chalmers had come out of the tradesmen's entrance on the side street and started due east, with Shaw trailing him.

"I borrowed Blake's hat and hot-footed it after them, picking them up at Third Avenue in time to relieve Shaw just as Gene was boarding a surface car. By sheer luck a drunk happened to be getting out of a taxi in front of Bud Westley's old poolroom, and I grabbed it and trailed the car. The kid couldn't have had a suspicion that he was being shadowed; for he got out at this corner and made straight for that shop over there without even looking around."

"You were an ass to be taken in like that, Porter, but perhaps it is just as well," Odell commented. "Our young friend must have been pretty desperate to risk such a move when he knew that the house was guarded inside and out.

I wonder why Miller hasn't come back? It doesn't look good to me."

"Look!" Porter exclaimed, touching his superior's arm. "That man. He has walked twice past the mouth of that alley; there he goes in! Think we had better trail along?"

"No. Give Miller a chance. If he gets in any trouble he'll blow his whistle."

For a few minutes longer they waited in silence, and at length Miller appeared from the shadows of the alleyway and hastened across the avenue toward them.

"Did you see that man?" he asked. "I had a narrow squeak, I can tell you. That was Sims, Farley Drew's valet!"

"What have you been doing all this time?" Odell demanded. "Does that alley extend through the block?"

"No. It ends in a blank wall midway, back of that butcher shop, I should say," Miller responded. "There are doors opening on it from all the shops as far as it reaches, and windows, too; but the back room of the tailor's is the only one lighted up. The door was locked and the window fastened and covered with a shade; but the glass in the lower sash of that window is broken by what looks like a bullet-hole, and the shade is ripped. I ought to have come back and reported at once, I suppose; but I put my eye to that hole and I thought you would want to know what was going on in there. A young, smoothed-faced, blond-haired man was sitting at a table—I guessed that was your bird—and facing him was an older man, nearly forty, I judge, who looked like a dissipated swell.

"He talked so low that I couldn't hear what he said but

he seemed to be laying down the law to the kid, who was getting madder by the minute; and when he broke in he raised his voice so that I could hear every word. 'You can't bluff me with any more of that bunk, Drew,' he said. 'I know you can send me up, but you won't; because you'll go too, and you know it! You can bet your boots I kept your letters, they were the only protection I had! I was a sucker and you bled me white, but don't forget I've got a come-back.' The other one growled something I couldn't hear, and then the kid broke in again. 'Not a chance! I don't know whether I got away with it to-night or not, but it's the last; and if you don't want to have to answer some embarrassing questions you'll clear out until this thing is over. I tell you Titheredge wised up that chap from Headquarters as to how you stand in our family circle and I don't think the statement was a flattering one.'

"I heard footsteps coming down the side street then, and ducked behind a pile of pickle-tubs that the delicatessen next door had stacked up in the alley; it was lucky I did, for a man passed twice on the sidewalk looking in and then turned and came straight toward me. I thought he had seen me, but he went right up to the back door of the tailor's shop and knocked twice quickly and after a minute once more. The door opened and he went in, and I beat it back here to you."

"All right. Go over and watch the front door of the shop and if anyone comes out stop them and blow your whistle; McCarren's on his beat and he'll be along here somewhere." Odell turned to Porter. "Come on. We'll have a look at what is doing in that back room."

They crossed the avenue, entered the alley and crept to

a position beneath the lighted window, where the detective straightened and peered through the ragged hole in the shade.

Only two men were visible in the room, the older one whom Miller had described and a stranger. The latter was gesticulating excitedly, and fragments of his speech reached Odell's ears.

"I told him a week, sir. . . Yes, he seemed to, but you can't tell about those bulls. . . . But where to, sir? There's still the difficulty about passports. . . . Oh, Honolulu. Yes, I can get the baggage out providing they are not watching the place."

The older man leaned forward and spoke rapidly in an indistinguishable tone; and Odell saw the other glance quickly toward the front of the shop and then back at the speaker with a look of horror on his face.

"Good God, no!" he cried; and the deference was gone from his tone. "I've helped in the other thing, and I'll admit that you've paid me well for it; but I wouldn't be a party to *that* for all the money in the world! . . . I don't care if it is, I'd rather do a stretch than go to the chair!"

Before the older man could speak the door leading into the shop opened, and Gene appeared.

"We're caught!" he cried wildly. "Either Sims or I must have been followed, Farley! There's a man walking up and down in front of the shop."

"Shut that door, you d—n fool!" Farley Drew finished up with a ferocious oath; but the other, whom Gene had called Sims, shouldered the young man aside and sprang through the door into the shop, while Drew himself strode over to the window.

Odell and Porter had barely time to conceal themselves behind the pickle-tubs which Miller had mentioned when the shade was pulled up, the window opened, and the sleek head of Farley Drew appeared cautiously reconnoitering.

"Nobody here." The head withdrew and the window slammed. Odell reached his point of vantage once more in time to see Sims reënter, closing the connecting door carefully behind him.

"It's the bull who came to your rooms an hour or so ago looking for you." The valet's tone was high and quavering, and his face expressed abject fright. "He couldn't have followed me here, for I made sure that no one was behind me when I ducked into the alley. I tell you they're on to us and the game is up!"

"Are we doing any harm? Is there anything incriminating about this room or our presence here?" demanded Drew, his tones carrying distinctly at last to the listeners outside. "The alley is clear and we have only to walk out that way and leave that flatfoot to cool his heels on the pavement till morning. Go back to my rooms and stay there until you hear from me, Sims; and stick to the same story you told to-night if you are interrogated again. As for you, Gene—"

His voice sank once more to a scarcely audible murmur, and Odell whispered hurriedly to Porter:

"Shadow Gene. Don't leave him out of your sight for a minute. I'll take Drew on; Sims is going back to the Bellemonde Annex."

"How about Miller?" asked Porter.

"No chance to warn him now unless your man or

mine crosses Third Avenue. Get behind the tubs quick! They're coming out!"

From their hiding-place they saw Sims emerge cautiously from the door, peer up and down the alley, and dart off to the side street. A long five minutes passed and then Gene appeared, closing the door behind him. He looked neither to right nor left, but hugging the wall of the houses he crept slowly to the street, hesitated a moment, and then headed west.

"Go on, Porter," Odell ordered. "If he goes back to the house 'phone Headquarters at once."

Without a word the operative glided away into the shadows, reappeared at the lighted mouth of the alley, and vanished again in the wake of his subject.

Five more minutes passed, then ten, and still there came no sign of the departure of the third man from the lighted room. Odell began to feel a vague sense of uneasiness. What if Drew had gone out the front way, overcome or blackjacked Miller, and made his escape? No direct mention had been made by any of the three of the investigation going on at the Meade house nor of the sequence of strange events which had taken place there; but Gene Chalmers had had plenty of time to discuss that with Drew before the arrival of Sims. How completely the latter was in his master's confidence Odell could not be sure. If Drew had indeed a guilty knowledge of the sinister problem it was evident that his servant was ignorant of it. The latter's cry that he would rather "do a stretch than go to the chair" had been too spontaneous and too frankly panic-stricken to brand him as capable of potential murder.

The ten minutes doubled in length, and just as Odell

emerged from behind the heap of tubs determined to risk another peep through the window, the door opened and Farley Drew stood smiling on the threshold.

"I've been waiting for you, Sergeant Odell. That is why I got rid of the others. Come in and we will have a little talk."

CHAPTER XIII

BEHIND LOCKED DOORS

FOR a moment Odell was dumbfounded by the sheer audacity of the man who stood in the lighted doorway on the alley with one hand slipped suggestively in the pocket of his dinner-coat, coolly smiling down at him. Then he shrugged and replied in the same vein.

"Thanks. I confess that at the present moment nothing would give me greater pleasure than to accept this invitation of yours, Mr. Drew."

His unexpected host threw wide the door and stepped back for him to enter.

"I trust that you will have no reason to retract that statement, Sergeant," he said pleasantly. "I have no doubt that we will be able to come to a mutually satisfactory understanding."

As he spoke he swung the door shut and with a single motion turned the key and thrust it into his pocket. The detective gave no sign that he had observed the act, even when Drew walked deliberately across the room to the other door and locked it also. Instead he stood gazing about him with frank interest.

The room was larger than Odell had supposed from his restricted view of it through the aperture in the torn window-shade. The sideboard and bookcase which flanked

the cracked, imitation-marble mantel were of cheap, highly-polished light oak, as were the center table and chairs. A wide, comfortable-looking couch stood against the opposite wall, and from behind a half-drawn curtain in the corner the end of a small gas-stove was visible, with pots and pans hanging beneath a shelf upon which china and canned goods were stacked indiscriminately.

Evidently this room was more than a rendezvous; it was a complete apartment in itself in which one could live indefinitely without aid or interference from the outside world.

"Of course this is not the Bellemonde Annex," Drew remarked with an ironically deprecatory air as if reading the other's thoughts. "It has its uses, however. Sit down, Sergeant. Will you smoke?"

Odell shook his head but pulled a chair up to the table and seated himself. Drew had assumed the upper hand in opening the interview, and the detective was well content to leave the situation for the time being in the other's control. He was curious to learn the motive back of his host's attitude. Drew had spoken of a "mutually satisfactory understanding." That could only mean a bargain, a compromise, or attempted bribery. Odell believed the man before him to be too clever to essay the latter; yet what compromise could he hope to effect with the police? The very fact that he sought to establish one told against him in the present situation, as he must realize.

Drew, meanwhile, had taken a box of cigars from a drawer of the sideboard, selected one and lighted it leisurely before he strolled over to the chair across the table from his guest and seated himself.

Odell looked up and waited for him to speak.

"Sergeant," he began at length with a speculative eye on the glowing tip of his cigar, "from what my young friend Gene Chalmers has told me to-night I believe you to be a man of not only common sense but intelligence; if I did not I should not have sought this interview. As I understand it Mr. Lorne sent for you through the mediation of his attorney to look into the coincidence of the deaths and other recent accidents which have taken place in his home. That of course is no concern of mine; but if in the pursuit of your investigation you should encounter evidence of some—er—irregularity which had no possible bearing on your case, what would you do?"

"Irregularity?" Odell repeated.

"Don't let us waste time by splitting hairs," Drew shrugged. "We will say rather that you might unearth a matter which would in no way interest the homicide department of your organization: a strictly family matter, the probing of which would cause only shame and unhappiness to people already burdened with grief and perplexity. Would you consider it your duty without consulting those most immediately concerned to bring it to the attention of —er—another branch of the police service?"

"If I discovered evidence of another and separate crime unconnected with the matter now under investigation?" The detective paused in seeming reflection. "That is rather a complex question, Mr. Drew. I fancy it would depend largely upon the nature of the crime and who ultimately benefited by it."

Farley Drew's eyes narrowed, but his tone was still that of one propounding an abstruse and impersonal argument.

"If the crime, as you call it, were for gain and happened to be committed by a member of the family it would be reasonable to suppose that the guilty person would be the one to profit ultimately, would it not?"

"Ultimately perhaps but not necessarily directly." A quick flash of memory had recalled the note which Odell himself had laid before his chief an hour before, and with it a sudden inkling of the possible truth had come. "If some member of the family were placed in a compromising position by an outsider and forced into crime for the immediate benefit of that outsider, in order to gain immunity for himself, it would cease to be a purely family matter, and its investigation would very likely bring shame and unhappiness and possibly incarceration to the instigator. Are you entirely disinterested in this theoretical discussion, Mr. Drew?"

He smiled steadily into the dark, smoldering eyes across the table, and Drew forced a sickly grimace in return, but the fingers holding his cigar twitched murderously.

"Quite." His voice was curiously even. "I confess I am disappointed in you, Sergeant; I had taken you to be a man of independent thought and action, not hidebound like the majority of your confrères. I have been speaking from a purely altruistic point of view. I wished to spare a heart-broken and panic-stricken family from further pain, and to save one young person from an unmerited punishment for what the family themselves would be the first to characterize as a mere mistake. I hoped that you could be induced to see the matter from that standpoint."

"And in saving the family from further annoyance in-

cidentally protect the real criminal, who had used the young person you mention as a mere tool, from the consequences of what he himself had instigated?" Odell laughed in the other's lowering face. "Let him go scot-free with the extortion he had practiced upon one member of the family in order to keep from the rest a knowledge of the truth? You are not serious, Mr. Drew. The young person may be in too deep, as it was meant he should be, for him to extricate himself; but if the matter is not exposed he may be in considerably deeper before he is through. Even if the affair did not come within the bounds of the case I am investigating, I think that I should find myself compelled to take a hand."

For a moment there was silence while Drew blew a series of smoke rings thoughtfully in the air.

"So Gene lied," he said at last. "He told me that he had destroyed that note. You have it in your possession, Sergeant?"

"No. I turned it in to my chief to-night to be brought to the attention of the bureau which it would ordinarily concern if I say the word." Odell watched the other's face narrowly. "I may add that no letter, no telephone message, nothing but my request in person would enable me to regain possession of it."

"But you could regain it?" The eagerness in Drew's tones was unrestrained.

"It is highly probable, Mr. Drew."

"Could anything induce you to do so? I mean nothing so crude as bribery, Sergeant. When two men each possess something that the other wants and their need is equally

urgent it is sometimes possible to arrange an amicable trade."

The compromise! It had come at last. Odell turned upon the other a gaze of mild inquiry.

"If I am in need of anything, at least to the extent of compounding a felony in order to obtain it, I am unaware of the fact," he said blandly. "Can you be a trifle more explicit, Mr. Drew?"

"You are young and ambitious; I think you have a real love for your work, an immense enthusiasm, and you are impatient to reach the top of the ladder. I've seen your name in the papers in connection with more than one big case in a subordinate capacity; but minor success is sometimes a boomerang. It leads to petty jealousies and persecutions which retard promotion until the injustice of it embitters your soul. One celebrated case brought to a successful conclusion by you alone would make you for life. This case you are working on promises to be the biggest thing that New York has seen for years. Can you deny that for the sake of your career alone it is not vitally necessary that you should discover the one who is guilty? I do not want the note back; I merely wish to see it destroyed in my presence and to receive your assurance that it and the matter to which it pertains shall be officially forgotten. If in return for this I furnish you with the motive for this series of crimes and attempted crimes, and the strongest kind of circumstantial evidence of the identity of their perpetrator, would you not consider it a fair deal? At best you can prove nothing against me and could only cause me embarrassment, while without my help you can never solve the problem you have undertaken."

"I am not so sure," Odell demurred. "I've only been on the case a little over twelve hours, you know; and I still have hopes. As to the note, you may remember I told you a few minutes ago that it would be turned over to the bureau which it would ordinarily concern *if I said the word.* I have not said the word; for I am not sure yet that it concerns any bureau other than mine."

"But you—you are a member of the homicide squad!" Drew stammered, and the stub of his cigar slipped unnoticed from his fingers.

"Exactly. I am not sure that that note has not a direct bearing on the murders I am investigating."

"You're mad, I tell you, man!" Drew sprang from his chair. "You know less than I thought of what that note refers to, if you imagine such a ridiculously far-fetched thing!"

"Not so far-fetched if you remember the wording of the note and compare it with the events of the past month," Odell remarked quietly. "I quoted a sentence or two from it before, but do you recall the rest?—'Your mother's went through without a hitch, and the next one will if you only keep your nerve. It's got to be done by the sixth or you know where the first one will send you.' I believe that is it word for word, Mr. Drew. When you consider that Mrs. Lorne has already been done to death 'without a hitch' and that the sixth of the month was the date of Julian's death, it appears to lend the note quite another significance; doesn't it?"

"My God!" Drew retreated a step or two. "What a devilish misconstruction. But you don't believe it yourself, Sergeant; you are trying to bluff me. Do you think I

would be enough of an ass to write so openly and sign my name to it if I were plotting murder?"

"It isn't so much what I think as what a jury would decide after the District Attorney had got through explaining it to them," responded Odell. "You know Hutchins's reputation, don't you, Mr. Drew? They say he can get a conviction on less evidence than anyone else who has ever been in office. It may be that the note together with a few other little things which we have against you are not sufficient to send you to the chair, but they are strong enough evidence to indict you and put you on trial."

"You can't do that!" Drew cried hoarsely, gripping the back of his chair as he stood behind it until it creaked a warning. "This talk of a conviction is all rot, and you know it; but I might as well go to the chair as through the notoriety and indignity of arrest on such a hideous charge! It would be a frame-up! You can't do it, Odell, you sha'n't! You'll never leave this room alive to put it over on me!"

"Steady there, Drew," the detective advised coolly, for the other's voice had risen and his features were working convulsively. "Don't take your hand off your number; the chief has the note, remember; and if I don't show up he will act on it at once. Moreover, two of my men accompanied me here, and one saw me enter this room. The other is waiting outside for me to rejoin him; if I do not do so within a certain specified time he has his instructions as to how to proceed."

A measure of self-control had returned to Drew and he laughed shortly.

"I'm not a murderer nor even a potential one, as you

know yourself, Sergeant. I spoke in sheer desperation without thinking what I was saying. I am not likely to place myself in jeopardy by eliminating an obscure member of the police force!" He caught himself up abruptly as if realizing that he had made a false move and added in haste: "I was foolish to permit myself to become excited over a mere bluff; I should have grasped the fact at once that neither you nor your chief would make laughing-stocks of yourselves by attempting to bring me to trial on such a charge and with such evidence! It would be a farce, a patent frame-up and you would be lucky if you were merely dismissed from the force without having further action taken against you!"

Odell could not help but admire the cleverness with which his opponent had turned the tables, and he smiled candidly.

"Granted. Still"—the smile faded and his jaw set sternly —"an arrest on suspicion, with due publicity, including the printing of that note verbatim in every newspaper in the city would achieve practically the same result as far as you are concerned, my dear Mr. Drew. I fancy that Gene's explanation would not only prove interesting reading to your circle of acquaintances but would prevent your making others among the unsophisticated scions of wealthy families."

"Perhaps, but Gene is not in a position to offer explanations," Drew retorted smoothly. "Having called your bluff, Sergeant, it seems to me that we are back at the starting-point of my proposition. Arrest me if you like; I admit it would ruin me as far as New York society goes, but I'll break you for it; and the world is wide for my activities although not for yours, unless you join the army of dis-

credited petty officials who open private detective agencies and starve. Bring me the note, call it square, and I'll make your career."

He was his own debonair, smiling, slightly ironic self again; and Odell studied him reflectively for a moment before replying. In the light of the revelation which had come to him since entering the room his theory, weak and scarcely tenable as he had known it in his heart to be, had been utterly demolished; and the detective realized that he had clung to it only because no other possible explanation of the mystery presented itself.

Could Farley Drew furnish him with the information of which he boasted? Was it within his power to supply the motive for this seemingly purposeless series of crimes? He had spoken, too, of strong circumstantial evidence of the identity of their perpetrator; if he were not bluffing in his turn would it not be well to agree to his terms?

The note in itself would not be a necessary factor in his prosecution on a separate charge with Gene's testimony available; and it appeared extremely unlikely that any charge would be brought. On the other hand, Odell's repugnance rose against entering into any traffic with this social leech; and in a swift revulsion from momentary discouragement his self-confidence returned.

What could Drew know which he might not discover for himself? Why stoop to bargain with this parasite and thereby tacitly admit his inability to solve the case unaided when every opportunity lay before him? His investigation was still only in a preliminary stage, and he resolved that not except as a final resort would he compromise with the man before him.

The silence in the room had remained unbroken, and Odell was so deeply engrossed in his meditation that he had not noted the strained look of suspense which crept gradually over the face of his host. The mournful yowl of a cat in the alley brought him swiftly from his reverie, and he straightened in his chair.

"You have stated the case with admirable conciseness, Mr. Drew. Granted that I was bluffing and starting with the premise that you are not and that you really can supply the information you claim, I see no need for haste in the conclusion of the bargain you propose. I will at least guarantee that no official use will be made of the note until I have decided to reject or accept your proposition."

"An armistice?" Drew threw back his head and laughed aloud, and something in the quality of his tone made Odell eye him sharply. A swift and inexplicable change seemed to have come over the man, and when he spoke again it was with a note of irresistible amusement in his voice. "You fancy that you will not need the information which I can give you? You mean to continue the investigation on your own account until you are assured that you are up against a blank wall? Very well, Sergeant. I've made the offer and it stands open. When you decide as you ultimately must to accept my proposition communicate with my man at the Bellemonde Annex and I will get in touch with you."

He rose and unlocking the door leading into the alley he opened it and stepped aside.

"We have come to an understanding even though it may not be productive of immediate results, and the night is no longer young. I do not wish to appear inhospitable, but

I fear that your bodyguard in front of the shop may become concerned for your safety."

Odell laughed.

"An armistice then, Mr. Drew." He nodded in response to the other's half-mocking bow as he passed through the door. "In spite of your convictions I may be able to struggle along without agreeing to your terms, so don't count on hearing from me too soon."

"I don't!" Drew's laughter rang out once more as he closed the door, and the same note of exultance sounded in his tones as before. What could it mean? He had not achieved his ends, he had not regained possession of the note; and yet his manner during the last few minutes of their interview had been that of one whose purpose had triumphed.

The light had gone out suddenly in the room behind him even before he had passed the window; and as the detective stumbled along in the darkness of the alley he pondered upon this latest problem of all which that day had presented. He did not underrate Drew's cleverness. The latter had become cognizant of his surveillance, and resolved to turn it to good account; but had the possession of the note been the real point at issue, the motive back of that invitation to a conference?

Drew must know as well as he that with Gene's testimony the note would be superfluous or at best merely corroborative evidence if any charge were to be brought against him, and he must also be aware of the remoteness of such a possibility. What then could have been his object in seeking the interview?

At this juncture Odell reached the mouth of the alley,

and his musing was abruptly terminated. He was aware of a stir in the shadows; a muttered command, and two dark forms hurled themselves upon him. He struck out wildly, but his arms were caught as in a vise; and a crushing blow descended upon his head. The ground swayed beneath him, then opened; and he slipped down and down into a bottomless void, while the shadowy figures were lost in the whirling darkness which encompassed him; but his last conscious thought was of the smiling, mocking man he had left in the room with the broken window. Farley Drew's purpose had been achieved.

CHAPTER XIV

ESCAPE

THE cool, gurgling sound of water slapping smartly and rhythmically against some obstruction directly beneath him, a briny, pungent tang in the stirless air, the feeling of an intolerable weight and intense cold upon his head and of rough blankets beneath his hands,—these were the first sensations which assailed Odell's returning consciousness.

He opened his eyes but closed them again quickly as a heavy step approached and a rough voice sounded in his ears.

"Still dead to the world?"

"Sure." A second voice with the unmistakable accent of the lower East Side replied to the first. "Yer don't t'ink dat rap I give him was any slap on de wrist, do yer? He's good for anoder day's sleep anyhow."

"What's the idea of the ice-bag?"

"Dunno. De main guy ordered it, an' dat lets me out. 'Fraid his little pet got more dan was comin' ter him an' was gonna croak, I guess. I could 'a told him different, but yer know how it is wid dese kid-glove guys; dey ain't takin' no chances on goin' up fer de long route. Yer boid's all right, ain't he? I heard him cussin' when yer took out de gag ter give him der eats."

Odell's heart gave a sudden leap. If he had a companion

in captivity it could be none other than Miller, for the conversation he had just overheard left him in no doubt that Drew had instigated the assault. Miller was lying bound and helpless somewhere near, and he must contrive somehow to reach him.

But the first voice was speaking again.

"There's nothing the matter with him just now except that he's fighting mad. He'll cool down by the time we turn him loose; but I tell you, Tony, I wish this job was through."

"What's eatin' yer?" demanded the one called Tony. "Pretty soft, I call it; five hundred cold iron men for a week's vacation and no come-back! De main guy is a prince about coughin' up, if he is a bum sport."

"I don't like it," the other insisted. "It's out of our line for one thing, and I never switched yet without changing my luck. It's one game to stick up a drunk for his roll and beat it; but kidnapping two of them, and dicks at that, don't look so good to me now that I've had time to think it over. Besides, what do we know of this fellow? What if he gets pinched and squeals on us?"

"Squeal nothin'!" ejaculated Tony disgustedly. "I t'ought yer was a live one, Pete. Dat guy Sims don't pick no squealers for his. Let's go out an' stretch our pins."

"Suppose this patient of yours wakes up?" Pete's tone was doubtful. "You haven't even got him tied."

"Aw, h—ll! Ain't I tellin' youse he's out for de count? C'm on."

A chair rasped against bare boards, and two pairs of feet clumped noisily away, but not beyond earshot for their footsteps; and the low rumble of their conversation still

came to Odell, alternately diminishing and increasing in volume as if they were walking up and down nearby. He heard the regular slap and gurgle of water somewhere below but felt no motion; and he listened in vain for the creak of hawsers or the vibrating hum of an engine which would show that they were on board a craft of some kind.

The brief glance which he had essayed before the sound of footsteps had warned him, revealed the fact that he was in a small room which might very well have been a cabin; but he had noticed neither windows nor portholes, and now once more he ventured to open his eyes.

He was lying upon a low couch with dirty gray blankets covering him to the chin; and within his range of vision were three chairs and a table of rough unpainted pine, rows of shelves against a wall of unplastered laths, and a window through which he could see the waving branches of a tree, its leaves already tinged with autumnal flame.

Yet the water was not lapping against the shore; he could hear it all about him underneath the floor. Clearly he must be in some sort of house built out over the edge of a bay or river; and save for the rumble of his captors' voices and that liquid gurgle and wash everything was very still.

He raised his hand weakly to steady the ice-bag and turned his head with infinite caution. A window in the opposite side of the room looked out upon a clear expanse of dancing blue waters, with a far shore-line and tiny white sails scudding between. Odell concluded that he must be facing due south, for the sun was setting low on his right. As he turned his eyes from the window they encountered a long, graceful canoe lying against the wall beyond the head of his couch, and the paddle standing in a corner; and from

under the lid of a carelessly closed chest the end of a signal flag trailed.

He had time only to note that the name upon the prow of the canoe was "Midinette" when the voices outside upon the little platform or porch grew louder, and he composed himself again with closed eyes just as the two men re-entered the room.

"All right." The one called Pete was evidently concluding the conversation. "I'll beat it up to the village and see if I can scare up any, but it's ticklish business these days; thought you were off the stuff."

"Not any more dan youse is, ol' pal," returned Tony. "If I hadn't lost de package overboard dat Volkert slipped me last night we'd 'a' been fixed fine, but honest, I got de yin somethin' fierce!"

"Well, I won't be long."

A door closed, and shambling footsteps approached the couch. Odell held himself motionless, scarcely daring to breathe as a shaky hand lifted the ice-bag, felt of it speculatively, and then replaced it. The footsteps moved away, then halted; and there came the scratch of a match and whiff of a vile cigarette. Then footsteps again, the opening and closing of a door, and Odell was once more alone.

Volkert! That was the name of the German who ran the drug-store on the corner of Third Avenue just across from the pseudo-tailor's shop and who had paid a heavy fine not three months before for selling drugs to the wretched addicts of the vicinity. The "package" which the druggist had slipped to Tony was self-evident; the latter and Pete were both, in their own parlance, coke-sniffers.

If Pete succeeded in securing a supply in the village of

which he had spoken, and they indulged over-freely after their enforced abstinence, the increased lethargy which would follow the brief period of exhilaration might permit Odell to make a break for liberty; but first he must find Miller, cut his bonds, and aid his escape.

If there were only some way in which he could get a message to his subordinate! While the sun sank behind the horizon and dusk settled into the dreary room the detective lay cudgeling his brains. His previous effort when he had raised himself to look about him had made his head throb violently and showed him how weak and dizzy he still was after the blow which had been dealt him.

Nevertheless, it had profited him somewhat. He knew that he must be confined in a private boathouse on some body of water broader than any nearby lake or river; and since for obvious reasons he could not have been removed far from the city, he conjectured that the boathouse was situated somewhere on the Connecticut shore of the Sound.

Beyond the possibility of escape he did not trouble himself about the means of getting back to the city. He would not have known whether one day or several had elapsed since he was struck down had it not been for Tony's fortuitous remark about having received the package from Volkert the night before; but the thought of even a day lost in his investigation drove Odell almost to the verge of desperation.

Captain Lewis would understand, of course, that something had happened to him; but would he keep the case open for him until he should be found, or would he assign another detective to it and thereby deprive Odell of the opportunity for which he had waited so long? Suppose the men whom

he had placed on guard both inside and out of the Meade residence should relax their vigilance for an hour and enable the nameless fiend to strike again?

Dusk deepened to darkness while Odell tortured himself with vain fears and imaginings, and still there was no sign of the return of Pete from the village. Tony shuffled in at last, however, muttering curses beneath his breath; and lighting a smoky lamp and an oil-stove in the corner, he started to prepare supper.

Odell watched him through warily half-closed eyes as he sliced ham, opened cans, and placed a huge loaf of bread and a wooden dish of butter on the table; and the detective realized suddenly that he himself was faint from hunger. No food had passed his lips since the previous night; and he dared not simulate a sudden return to consciousness now lest Tony redouble his vigilance.

He lay in a silent agony of craving, while the tantalizing odor of coffee filled the room, and Tony, still grumbling audibly over his confederate's delay, shuffled back and forth from shelves to table and stove.

All at once Odell narrowed his lids until only a mere slit remained, through which he gazed with greater intensity at his jailor's movements; for Tony had brought a battered tin tray to the table and placed upon it a plate of ham and beans, a steaming cup of coffee, and a great hunk of bread.

It was evidently his intention to feed the other prisoner, and Odell mentally writhed at his inability to establish communication with Miller. If only he could reach that tray unobserved and place upon it some token which would show his subordinate that he was near at hand and on the

lookout for a chance to escape. If Tony would but turn his back for a minute.

But if the opportunity should come what object could he place upon the tray? He thrust one hand down cautiously beneath the blanket but found as he had supposed that his pockets had been emptied; not even a stub of pencil or scrap of paper remained.

At that moment as if in answer to his unexpressed prayer a faint "halloa" sounded from the landward direction, and with a grunt of relief Tony turned and rushed from the room, the tray forgotten.

Odell sprang from the couch with the recklessness of desperation; but he had not taken his weakness into account, and the room whirled about him so that he reached out blindly to steady himself. His hands caught the back of a chair, and as his vision cleared again he saw that hanging across it were his collar and necktie, the latter of a curious blue and black design. Would Miller recognize it?

Outside he could hear the two men calling to each other, and it was evident that Pete was still some distance away; but no time could be lost. Odell took up the necktie and tried feverishly to tear off a fragment from the end, but the strong silk resisted his efforts. He looked hastily about him, and his eyes rested upon the sharp knife with which Tony had sliced the ham. Seizing it he hacked and tore at the silk until a short strip of it came off in his hand. Then he gouged a piece of bread from the center of the portion of loaf upon the tray, thrust the bit of silk into the aperture, and replaced the soft bread to mask its presence.

The knife he secreted beneath the mattress of the couch,

and reclining again he pulled the filthy blankets up to his chin.

Pete's voice had lowered as he approached; but it had perceptibly thickened since his departure, and he stumbled as he ascended the steps which led up to the porch.

"Not a —— —— bit of 'snow' in the whole —— —— burg!" he ended with a hiccough of disgust. "They don't seem to know what it is, Tony my boy, but I got the next best thing to it."

"Whiskey?" Tony's voice was not over-enthusiastic.

"And laudanum. A foxy old hick in the first farmhouse down the road sold me the booze, and I got the other in the drugstore. We'll make a night of it."

"Gimme dat bottle an' go feed your boid foist," Tony interrupted, to Odell's vast relief. "I fixed de tray o' eats 'cause youse was gone so —— —— long I figgered dat youse had blew."

The door opened and Pete staggered in, seized the tray, and departed; while Tony seated himself astride a chair and raised the bottle to his lips.

The fates had been more kind than Odell had dared to hope. He knew the swift and deadening effect of the mixture which Pete had brought; and when once the men succumbed to its influence escape would be assured. He strained his ears to listen for the direction from which Pete would return, for he had as yet no idea where Miller was confined. He had heard the former cross the porch and descend the steps again, but that was all. Could it be that Miller was in some other building, an outhouse or shed perhaps? If so he could scarcely hope to find it in the darkness; and his subordinate, gagged, would be un-

able to guide him even if he dared venture a subdued call.

While these disturbing thoughts filled his consciousness they were broken in upon suddenly by a string of picturesque and variegated oaths uttered in a vigorous tone which seemed to rise from beneath the floor, and he breathed a sigh of relief. The voice was unmistakably Miller's. Would he find that bit of silk, recognize it, and be able to conceal it from the befuddled gaze of his jailor?

An indistinguishable retort from Pete in a threatening rumble replied to the reception which had greeted him, and thereafter there was silence for a space. Tony drank deeply again and placed the bottle on the table with a thump. The coffee had boiled away and an odor of scorching grounds filled the air; but Tony was plainly oblivious to it, and Odell stealing a glance at him noted that he was gazing straight ahead of him with the set, glassy stare of a somnambulist; the laudanum was already getting in its stupefying effect.

All at once Miller's voice sounded loud and clear from below as if raised with deliberate intent.

"What's the good of keeping me tied up in an old boat under a rotten wharf? I couldn't run away if I wanted to, but I'll bet you a *necktie* against an old pair of boots"—

The words died away in a choking gurgle as if the speaker had been swiftly gagged; but Odell had heard enough, and a glow of renewed hope and cheer swept over him. Good old Miller! He had found the torn bit of silk, realized its message, and done his best to reply to it. An hour or two more at most and the way would be clear for a getaway.

But the detective's hopes seemed doomed to be indefinitely deferred. When Pete reëntered with the empty tray Tony

roused himself and made fresh coffee, and that together with the hearty supper which the two men ate seemed to neutralize the effect of what they had drunk; nor were they in any haste to renew their libations.

In an inward fever of suspense Odell forced himself to lie motionless while they smoked leisurely and carried on an intermittent conversation of which he could make nothing. Had they forgotten the bottle of drugged liquor which stood before their very eyes? He had no way of judging the hour, but the oil in the lamp was half consumed and the branches of the tree beyond the window were silvered with moonlight. The bottle on the table was still two-thirds full; could they mean to husband it until the next day?

It was Tony who brought the situation to an end.

"Fer de love o' Mike pass us de bottle! Hear dem crickets an' t'ings out dere? Chee, but I'm lonesome fer T'oid Av'noo!"

Pete drank copiously and handed the bottle to his confederate.

"I told you I wasn't crazy about this job," he remarked gloomily. "I wonder what the idea is anyway in holding these guys here for a week?"

Odell wondered also and listened intently for the reply.

"Ter give somebody time ter make a getaway, I guess," Tony answered carelessly.

"Well, suppose *they* make it, Sims and the guy that was here this morning, and after the week is up we find ourselves planted here with the two dicks on our hands and minus the rest of the kale that was promised?" Pete reached for the bottle and held it once more to his lips. "Say, when did that guy say he'd be out again?"

"He didn't." Tony scowled. "Just says dat when dis boid wakes up ter rope an' gag him like his pal down below. Maybe Sims would double-cross us, at dat! Tell yer what, Pete, yer keep yer eye on dis sleepin' beauty o' mine termorrer, an' I'll run up ter de big burg an' get a slant on de game. I'll bring some snow back wid me from Volkert's, too."

"No, you don't!" Pete laughed cynically. "I'm taking no chances on you either, my friend. We're in this together and we'll stick."

For the better part of an hour they argued the question, while the contents of the bottle slowly diminished, and their tones, at times raised to the point of fury, grew thick and drowsy. At length Tony's head dropped forward on his breast, and his body slumped sidewise in his chair; but Pete still sat with brooding eyes fixed upon the bottle.

Would he never sleep? Odell's nerves were tense and quivering with the eagerness so long restrained, and the minutes dragged interminably. Once he thought he heard a dull, thumping sound from below; but although he listened with strained intensity it was not repeated.

He glanced again at Pete. It had been a good twenty minutes since the fellow had moved a muscle: could he be in a stupor? His jaw had dropped, and the lids were half closed over the vacant, dull eyes; it seemed, too, in the wavering flare of the smoky lamp that bluish shadows had crept up about his mouth.

Odell had seen that look in the faces of men before; and the thought which came to him all but stunned his faculties for a moment. Then pulling himself together he stirred ex-

perimentally, emitted a faint groan, and threw one arm up over his head. Tony slept on undisturbed, and the other figure remained motionless.

With a quick, noiseless movement the detective sat up, threw the dirty blankets from him, and tiptoeing across the floor laid one hand on Pete's shoulder and with the other felt for his heart. It had ceased to beat.

Odell stepped back dizzily and leaned against the table for support. The shock of his discovery combined with his long fast and the effect of the blow which he had received made him faint and giddy; but by a supreme effort he mastered the weakness which was swiftly overcoming him and straightened.

The thought of food had become all at once repugnant to him, with that dead man sitting there; but he reminded himself sternly that he might have need of all the strength he could muster before he and Miller were safely away from this hideous spot and back at their posts once more.

A box of matches lay on the table, and pocketing that and the knife which he had secreted beneath the mattress of the couch, he moved over to the shelf near the stove. An old newspaper was spread upon it, and in this he wrapped the bread and ham that remained.

He was turning to the door when a fresh thought made him pause. If his pockets were empty Miller's were probably in a like condition, and there was no means of ascertaining how far they were from the city.

Money was an absolute essential, and he dared not attempt a search of Tony's pockets lest he awaken. There was no fear of that as far as Pete was concerned, the de-

tective assured himself grimly; and approaching the body once more he pushed it forward by the shoulders, bracing it against the table, and felt in the hip pockets.

The first yielded only a short blunt-nosed pistol; but from the second he drew a worn wallet bulging with bills. Thrusting both articles into his own pockets, Odell eased the body back into its former position and stealing to the door cast a final glance backward.

Tony still slept oblivious to all about him; and Pete's body sagged limply in the chair, his glazed eyes fastened upon the bottle which had brought death to him.

The detective closed the door softly behind him, and crossing the narrow porch made his way down the steps in the clear, cold light of the moon. He found himself upon a strip of rocky beach bordered by low shrubs and bushes, through which a single path wound away and disappeared in the stretch of dense woodland beyond. The boathouse itself was raised high above the water upon stout piles of concrete; and directly beneath it an open motor launch rode at anchor, with a rough gangplank reaching from its deck to the shore.

The moonlight did not penetrate its dark recesses; but as Odell ran up the gangplank something moved in the bottom of the boat, and an inarticulate gurgle reached his ears.

He drew the box of matches from his pocket, and striking one held its sputtering flame close to the writhing bundle. Miller's eyes stared up at him, the muscles of his jaw working convulsively in the effort to speak; but the choking gag prevented his utterance. Odell tossed the match into

the water, knelt beside his companion and deftly removed the gag.

"Steady, now, Miller; don't speak aloud. One of them is only asleep, and we've got to make a quick getaway."

"Gad! but that's a relief!" Miller exclaimed huskily. "Here, I'll roll over so that you can get at my wrists; the rascal tied them behind my back, and confoundedly tight, too. How did you manage to get free, Sergeant?"

"They didn't tie me up. I was unconscious from that knockout I got until a few hours ago; and they—the fellow who's been guarding me—thinks I am still."

As he spoke Odell had cut the cords which bound the other's wrists; and now he began working at the rope about his ankles.

"How are your legs? Pretty numb?"

"No." Miller sat up with an involuntary groan and drew one knee up experimentally. "I guess they are all right. Have you any idea where we are?"

"Somewhere near a village; and that path through the trees leads to it. We ought to be able to find a garage or some farmer with a jitney who will take us back to the city if it is not too far. Come, I'll help you."

Miller staggered a little as they passed down the sagging gangplank and turned for a last look at the boathouse.

"The chief will send up to-morrow and clean out this hole, but I'd like one crack myself at the fellow who blackjacked me in front of that shop last night and has kept me trussed up like a Christmas turkey ever since," he observed grimly. "I'll get him yet on my own account!"

"You won't have a chance, Miller." Odell nodded slowly

in response to the other's startled look. "He's sitting up there dead in his chair. Whiskey and laudanum. His heart must have been weak; and he was a snow-bird, anyway. Come on, we haven't an hour to lose."

Silently the two moved along the path and disappeared among the trees.

CHAPTER XV

WHAT RANNIE KNEW

IN the gray of dawn two dirty, bedraggled, unshaven figures trailed up the wide, low stairs at Police Headquarters and presented themselves before Captain Lewis.

"Well, of all the —— Odell! Where have you been? Miller, why didn't you come back to report? This is a h—l of a note!" The captain, worn from his night-long vigil, blustered to mask his relief. "If this is the way you conduct a case, Sergeant"—

"It isn't," Odell replied wearily. "Miller and I have been personally conducted for the last thirty-six hours; tied up in an old boathouse on the shore at Windermere, Connecticut, after being held up and blackjacked by a couple of crooks hired by Sims, Farley Drew's man."

He made a detailed report; and at its conclusion the chief issued some hurried orders, and then turned to Miller.

"Did you recognize the man who brought you your food; the one who the Sergeant says was called Pete?"

"No, Captain. It was pretty dark under that boathouse in spite of the sun shining outside, and I couldn't place his voice. Volkert can identify him, though, if Tony has skipped out by the time the boys get there."

"Tony won't do much skipping if he's sleeping off a whiskey-and-laudanum jag," the captain reported grimly.

"I'm going to 'phone the sheriff at Windermere to hold him for us. How far is that boathouse from the village?"

"About a mile and a half," Odell responded. "The sheriff may know whose it is if you tell him that there is a canoe stored there named the 'Midinette.' It took us nearly an hour to wake up the fellow at the garage; but when we succeeded he brought us into the city in good time. Here's the rest of the money I took from Pete's body, and the pistol."

As he laid them upon the desk the chief took up the receiver and put in a call for Windermere, then turned once more to the detective with a quizzical light in his keen eyes.

"Well, I suppose all you want now is to get a bath and then sleep the clock around," he remarked.

"No, sir," replied Odell doggedly, although his head was swimming from fatigue. "I want to clean up and get back on the job as fast as I can. Have there been any fresh developments?"

"A few. Want Miller any longer?"

"Not now. I may need him to-night, though."

"All right." Captain Lewis nodded to the subordinate. "You're off duty until six, Miller. Report then if you think you can get about the streets without being kidnapped."

Miller, flushing at the implied rebuke in the chief's heavy attempt at a jest, withdrew; and as the door closed after him Odell asked eagerly:

"Did you get anything further out of Peters?"

"No. After I got through with him yesterday morning he was like a squeezed orange; but beyond what he told you about that voice that he heard, his mind is only a blank of

bewilderment and a kind of superstitious terror. The queer thing about it is that he is back at his old job, after all." The chief leaned forward in his chair. "I had to let him go, of course; we hadn't a thing to hold him on, and he said he was going back to his sister's; but I put a man on him anyway, so that we could get him if we needed him again. He didn't even want to go to the Meade house for his things, and wouldn't until I told him that we had it guarded inside and out; yet when he got there he stayed; told Taylor that Miss Meade wanted him to, and he thought it was his duty. Funny what an influence that quiet little old maid seems to have on everybody."

Odell looked up at the last observation.

"Miss Meade? She seems to be the least considered of anyone in the household."

"Yet she is running them all now in an unobtrusive way. Porter and Kelly and Smith all tell me the same. I took a run up there myself yesterday afternoon and had a talk with her. She seems quite crushed by the evidence of the attempts on the lives of her nephew and her brother-in-law; and I don't think she believes for a minute that there was anything questionable about the death of the other boy and of her sister. Lorne himself is much better and wants to see you. He sent Titheredge down here for you; but I told him that you were working on the case and might not show up for several days."

"And Gene; did he return to the house the night before last? Is Porter still on the job?"

"Yes, but the kid has turned sulky; shut himself up in his room and wouldn't talk to anybody. Smith sent in his report late last night."

"Smith?" In the stress of swift-moving events Odell had not thought of the plainclothesman whom he had detailed to watch the maneuvers of the temperamental elder daughter of the house. "What did he have to say?"

The chief grinned.

"She's a clever little girl, that Miss Cissie. Slipped out of the house yesterday morning about ten o'clock and went to the Fitz-Maurice Hotel. Smith was right behind her, and he heard her ask the girl at the telephone exchange for York 7087, which happens to be the number of Farley Drew's private wire. Smith got into the next booth and heard her end of the conversation. She kept insisting on seeing Drew, and she wasn't satisfied with the excuses she got; for she flounced out of the booth in a temper and taking a taxi at the hotel entrance drove straight to the Bellemonde Annex.

"At the desk there they told her the same story that Miller got from Sims the other night and that I guess she had just received herself over the telephone. Smith says that she was white with rage when she came out; but for all that she must have had her wits about her, for she saw and recognized him."

Captain Lewis paused with a chuckle, and the detective demanded:

"What did she do then?"

"Led him about the town by the nose! He says no old-timer could have pulled any cleverer stunts than she did to throw him off the track; changed cabs half a dozen times, dodged in and out of department stores and hotels, and zigzagged from one side of the city to the other, doubling on her own trail all the time. And where do you think she

wound up? At a dingy little second-rate apartment-house west of the park; a walk-up, with letter-boxes and bells in the vestibule!"

"Did Smith find out what she was doing there? Whom she was calling on?"

"The party she was looking for was gone. Smith saw her read over the names on both sides of the vestibule two or three times; and when she came out she looked discouraged. The janitor was sweeping the sidewalk, and she stopped to speak to him for a minute; so after she had got in her taxi Smith went up to him, slipped him a buck and asked him whom the young lady had been looking for. He said it was one of the tenants who had gone away sick eight or nine months before, a Mrs. Gael."

"Gael," Odell repeated. "That's the name of the woman whose husband divorced her and brought in Drew as co-respondent."

So little Miss Chalmers was not so unsophisticated as she had seemed. Her desire to see Drew must have been desperate indeed to have led her to cast aside all ordinary conventions and seek him at the home of the woman whom he had discarded.

"Exactly," the chief responded dryly. "She didn't know where else to look for him apparently, for she went straight home from there; and Smith says that she had a scene with her aunt which reduced the poor woman to tears, and then locked herself in her room. So much for his report. Taylor searched Gene's room night before last when he beat it to keep his date with Drew, but he didn't find anything except clothes and stuff for out-door sports; skates and tennis-rackets and polo and golf and hockey sticks. He

went through Miss Meade's room yesterday morning and the one her sister used to occupy, but found nothing suspicious in either of them, of course. He won't have an opportunity to get into Lorne's room for some time to come, and the younger son, the hunchback, is still sick; but I left Taylor on the job on the chance that you would turn up to-day and might need him. The outside men report nothing doing."

"And Kelly?" The detective, in mentally gathering up the loose threads of his investigation at the point where his abduction had interrupted it, recalled the fourth man, to whom he had assigned the task of searching for the tools with which the picture-wire had been severed and the top step of the stairs sawed through. "Hasn't he sent in any report yet?"

"Only these." The chief swung about in his chair and took from the floor, where they had rested against the wall unnoticed by Odell, a long, heavy steel saw and a file with an electric attachment. "Are they the tools you were after?"

The detective reached forward and examined them eagerly.

"Good work!" he exclaimed. "Where did Kelly find them?"

"In the last place he would have thought to search for them; the open tool chest in the cellar. He says he passed them up a dozen times that first day; looked straight at them and never even saw them! It took a cool head, that, to leave them out in plain view on the chance that they wouldn't be noticed among the other tools."

"The obscurity of the obvious!" Odell smiled slyly. "Remember what I said to you the other day about the

secondary mind, Captain? This is clear evidence of it; and it will be no small help, I can tell you, in tracing the culprit, although I've known from the first that no ordinary mentality was back of this series of crimes, in spite of the strange element of carelessness which enters into each episode of it. The first instinct of the ordinary criminal would have been to secrete these tools in as out-of-the-way a place as their size would permit; but if he were a degree higher in intelligence he would realize that such a spot would be the first in which they would be searched for, and the next step in his reasoning would be that if they were left in plain view with others of their kind which were in occasional legitimate use in the household they would be overlooked."

"Sure; that's what I said." The chief moved impatiently in his chair. "They are what you were after, all right. Kelly asked Peters last night if there were any electrical carpentering tools in the house or a big saw, and he says that the butler's surprise looked like the real thing to him. Peters told him they'd never had any use for a big saw, and he had apparently never heard of electrical tools."

Odell laid the file and saw back on the table.

"It is too bad they have been handled so much," he remarked. "Your finger-prints and mine and two or three more are all superimposed on them."

"That doesn't matter," the chief grunted. "Look at your hands."

"Phew! Oil, eh?" Odell pulled a grimy handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his fingers. "I commandeered this from the garage man; those rascals up there stripped me clean. Did Kelly upset an oil-can in the tool-chest?"

"No. He said all the other things in it were rusty from disuse. Your secondary-minded murderer must have cleaned these carefully with oil to remove his own finger-prints before putting them with the others."

Odell shook his head.

"I don't get it," he admitted. "The combination of foresight and ingenuity together with rank carelessness in detail stumps me. It must be that there are two of them working together, or rather one carrying out the instructions of another and doing it in a bungling fashion. The method of work suggests two distinct personalities, and yet I cannot point to even one possible suspect now."

As the chief opened his lips to reply the telephone rang and he took up the receiver.

"Windermere? Sheriff Higgins speaking? . . . This is Police Headquarters, New York. . . . Yes, Captain Lewis, Homicide Bureau. Get out as quick as you can to a boathouse on the shore of the Sound about a mile and a half from your village. . . . No, I can't tell you on whose place it is, but there's a canoe stored there with the name 'Midinette' painted on it. You'll find a dead man sitting in a chair, and another sleeping off a jag. Hold him for me on a charge of—*What's that?* . . . What? . . . Nothing left? . . . No trace of the bodies? . . . You're sure it's the right place? . . . Yes, 'Midinette.' . . The Osgood Praye estate. . . . Thanks, Sheriff. My men are on the way out to you now, and I will appreciate it if you will give them all particulars."

He hung up the receiver slowly and turned to Odell.

"That boathouse burned down to the concrete piles last night an hour after you and Miller made your escape," he

said soberly. "When the village fire-department got there they found nothing left but a mass of charred timbers washing around between the piles and no trace of the bodies."

"The lamp!" Odell ejaculated. "There wasn't enough oil in it to last more than an hour longer, at most. Tony must have waked up and lurched against it, for there wasn't any wind to blow it over. Gad! what a death for him!"

An hour later, after making himself presentable and with the data which the chief had given him carefully catalogued in his mind, the detective set out for the Meade house. His first intention was to see Gene and force from him an explanation of that note which Drew had made an excuse for the interview in the room back of the shop, and he anticipated that the explanation would merely confirm his own later suspicion; but that would be as so much dead wood out of his path.

He had interviewed neither Lorne nor his youngest stepdaughter as yet, and if they could furnish him with no clue the process of elimination was all that was left to him. The chief was even now honeycombing the city for Drew, but his apprehension was a matter of relative unimportance to Odell; he was too deeply engrossed in the problem which the recent events in the Meade house presented to give a thought to personal reprisal for his abduction; and he no longer believed that Farley Drew had any hand in the series of crimes he was investigating.

Peters, looking slightly better than at their last meeting, opened the door to him, and Miss Meade met him with outstretched hand in the hall.

"Oh, Sergeant Odell, I'm so glad that you have come!"

There were tired lines under her eyes. "Mr. Lorne looked for you eagerly yesterday, and I—we were all anxious to see you."

"You have something to tell me, Miss Meade?"

"Unfortunately, no. We are all as much in the dark as before; but the suspense is horrible! It has been a comfort to know that your men were here to protect the children."

"The children alone, Miss Meade? The next blow might have fallen on you; have you thought of that?" he asked her quietly.

She shook her head.

"I thought only of the others. It doesn't matter about me; you see, I—I have no fear. But tell me, have you discovered anything, Sergeant Odell? Although I shrank at first from a knowledge of the truth I feel now that any awakening, no matter how bitter and soul-crushing, would be far better than this nightmare in which we are all living. Please be frank with me; I must know."

"My dear Miss Meade, when I have any news you may rest assured that you shall be the first to hear it," he replied gently.

"Will you go up to my brother-in-law now? He has been asking for you ever since he woke up." She paused and then added: "But you look very tired, Sergeant Odell; may I not first offer you a cup of coffee?"

He shook his head smilingly.

"Thank you, no. I breakfasted early. I will interview Mr. Lorne presently, but first I should like to see Taylor, one of my operatives here; may he be sent for, please?"

Taylor came to him in the library, and at his entrance Odell noted the look of grim satisfaction upon his face.

"Good morning, Sergeant. Have you seen the chief?"

Odell nodded.

"Just came from him. He said that you succeeded in searching Miss Meade's room and her sister's, but you found no opportunity to get into the one occupied by the younger Chalmers boy."

"I did this morning, not an hour ago. He kept to his room all day yesterday, but to-day he went down to breakfast, and that was my chance," Taylor replied eagerly. "I didn't find anything in his room except clothes and books; there wasn't so much as a single letter lying around, and his fountain pen looked as if it hadn't been used for months.

"I reckon he doesn't do much but read, for I never saw so many books in my life outside of a library; they're overflowing the bookcases and piled up in the corners of the room, and a lot of them are on medical subjects. There were a couple of extra braces, too, for his back; and the shelves and cabinet in his private bathroom were stacked with medicine-bottles.

"I was in there giving them the once over when he came up from breakfast, and I swung the door quick within an inch of closing just as he opened the other door leading from the hall, for I'd heard that high whining voice of his, and I knew he wasn't alone. I only caught the end of a sentence first:—'only keep you a minute.' Then a woman's voice said quietly: 'Yes, sir.' It was that maid Gerda, and she spoke in a kind of a hushed way as if she were waiting for something to fall.

"'I've known for the last month'—young Chalmers finished with something so low I couldn't hear; but the

woman gave a sharp little cry and then tried to cover it up by a bluff. 'I don't know what you mean, sir! I—I never heard'—

"He laughed that sneering laugh of his and interrupted her. 'I caught you listening at the head of the stairs one day and saw the expression on your face as you looked down at him. You looked as though you could kill him then. I'm not going to give you away; don't be afraid of that. Life and death are nothing to me, and I wouldn't ring the curtain down on this little melodrama for worlds. It amuses me immensely.'

"She lost all her deference then and snapped out at him. 'You—you're not human!' He only laughed at her again and said, 'Possibly not, but I don't want the fun spoiled. That's why I asked you to step in here for a moment; I wanted to warn you that the young man from Headquarters is no fool, and your English is altogether too good for a lady's maid. Better cultivate Jane a bit even if it does go against the grain, and copy her speech the next time he interviews you. That's all.'

"I tried to get a look at them through the crack in the door, but they weren't on a line with it; and the woman didn't reply for a full minute. When she did it was with all the old deference and a little bit added, as if she were mocking him. 'Very good, sir. Thank you, sir.' And with that she was gone.

"I was afraid he would come into the bathroom and catch me; but he walked up and down for a little, chuckling to himself, and then turned and left the room, and I heard him going down the front stairs, which were mended yesterday. That was my cue, and I beat it."

"You're quite sure of that conversation word for word, Taylor?" Odell asked.

"Word for word, Sergeant. Whoever the woman is, young Chalmers has her number."

CHAPTER XVI

MISS RISBY SPEAKS

WHAT could that cryptic conversation mean? For some little time after he had dismissed the operative and sent him back to Headquarters Odell sat lost in thought. It did not seem possible that even the sardonic little hunchback, embittered as he was with all the world, could have been referring to the series of crimes which had already carried off his own mother and brother, unless he were indeed insane, as the woman Gerda had hinted. But had she in her turn been referring to him when she gave to Odell himself that mysterious warning?

Obviously, if each suspected the other neither could be guilty; yet what could the "melodrama" be, and why should Rannie Chalmers's callous, sneering remark have shaken the woman momentarily from her well-studied pose? At whom could she have been looking with murder in her eyes when the hunchback came upon her, as he had said? If she were not concerned in the tragic mystery what was her purpose in this house?

Even as the questions thronged his brain, a casual remark of Taylor's recurred to him with startling significance. "I never saw so many books in my life . . . a lot of them are on medical subjects."

It was natural that a chronic invalid should be interested

in his condition, perhaps to a morbid extent, and would collect all the data he could find bearing on his case; but what if Rannie had gone further in his study of medicine? If his library contained any volumes on toxicology it would open up a new field of conjecture.

Odell dismissed the matter from his thoughts for the time being and started upstairs. He would have liked to investigate it at once; but Richard Lorne had summoned him in the first place, and he had not yet had an opportunity of hearing his version of the mystery.

At the top of the stairs, however, he all but collided with Smith, who with finger on lip beckoned him into an alcove formed by the bay window over the entrance door.

"Something's up, Sergeant," he whispered hurriedly. "Taylor told me you were here, and I was just coming down to find you."

"The chief told me about Miss Chalmers's attempt to elude you yesterday"—Odell was beginning, but the operative cut him short.

"I mean to-day, now! She never left her room yesterday after that scene with her aunt when she got home, and this morning she went down to breakfast with a face like a thundercloud. I was sitting in the hall outside the dining-room door reading my paper and waiting to see what her next move would be, when that housemaid, Jane, came running up the back stairs.

"She was all excited and smiling, but when she saw me she changed like a shot; gave me a cool little nod, and then got a duster out of the hall closet and began fussing around and humming as if there was nothing on her mind but her

hair; yet I noticed that she didn't get very far from that dining-room door, and she kept her eyes on it, too.

"Miss Meade and the two young ladies and the hunchbacked boy were the only ones who had come down to breakfast; and when they finished and came out I watched Jane.

"She turned when she heard their chairs moved back and went up the back stairs; and I walked to the front of the hall and stood in the library door behind the curtain, where I could see up the main staircase. Miss Cissie left the dining-room first and started for her room; and there was Jane waiting for her in the upper hall. They stood talking together for a minute; and I saw Miss Cissie jump as if she'd been shot and grab Jane by the arm and drag her off down the hall.

"Miss Meade and her younger niece stayed in the dining-room talking to Peters; but before I had a chance to get upstairs Rannie Chalmers came out and started up ahead of me, so I went down the hall to the back stairs.

"When I reached the second floor he was just entering his room, talking to Gerda; and Miss Cissie and Jane were nowhere to be seen. Rannie's door was open and I waited here, where we are standing now, until Gerda came out; and then he followed her and went down-stairs again. I hurried over to Miss Cissie's door and listened. Jane was saying: 'Oh, miss, it's much too good for me'; and Miss Cissie said, 'Nonsense! I can't wear it any more now that I am in mourning, and I appreciate what you've done for me. I'll give you ever so many more pretty things if you will bring me any other messages that may come that way, Jane, and never tell anybody.'

"It wasn't what she said so much, Sergeant, though it was enough to show me that Jane had put something over on me, as the way she said it; you never heard such a change in anyone's tone in your life! Her voice was low but shaking with excitement and happiness too. You could tell. I moved away just in time to see Jane come out and whisk up to her own room with a pink evening dress over her arm."

"Humph!" Odell ejaculated. "Where is the young lady now?"

"Still in her room."

"Well, go outside and ask Blake and Shaw—they're on the day watch—if they saw Jane talking to anyone at either entrance to the house; then come back and don't let Miss Cissie out of your sight if she leaves her room. If she should go out while I am here, be sure you let me know before you trail her."

The operative started upon his errand, and Odell went to the door of Mr. Lorne's room and knocked. An eager voice fairly bellowed the command to enter, and he obeyed, to find the sick man sitting bolt upright among his pillows.

"At last!" the latter exclaimed. "Where the devil were you all day yesterday, Sergeant? I kept the wires hot ringing up Headquarters for you, and got Titheredge to go down there; but all that your captain would say was that you were working on the case. What have you discovered? Do you know who the scoundrel is who cut that picture-wire and tried to break my neck on the stairs?"

Odell shut the door carefully and drew a chair up to the bed.

"I can't tell you very much at this stage of the game,

Mr. Lorne." He smiled noncommittally. "I have come rather to hear what you have to tell me about the whole affair. I understand that it was your desire to notify us even before the portrait fell in the library."

"Yes. I was talking it over with Titheredge when Gene came in with the letter. I felt that those accidents which resulted in the deaths of my poor wife and her son with so short a time between might have been deliberately designed to appear as accidents. I don't know why the conviction came to me. There was no one I could suspect, no motive I could fathom; and yet I felt sure as the days passed after Julian's death that something sinister and horrible lay behind it all.

"I'm a plain, hard-headed business man, and never took any stock in this psychic stuff, but there has been an oppression aside from our natural grief in the air; the children all felt it and I shouldn't wonder if Effie, my sister-in-law, did too, although she is such a diffident little body that I doubt if she ever had an independent thought in her life.

"It was as if there were someone else in the house, someone whom we could not see, who was waiting to pick us off one by one like fruit from a tree." He paused, and the ruddy color swept over his face. "I suppose that sounds like damn-fool talk to you, Sergeant; for, as Titheredge said, I hadn't a tangible fact to back up my suspicions until the portrait fell."

"Some more facts are in my possession now, Mr. Lorne, which substantiate your suspicions," Odell observed gravely. "I have proof that that razor was not drawn across your step-son's throat by his own hand, and strong circumstantial evidence, in which the specialists and your family physician

concur, that Mrs. Lorne's death was deliberately brought about. The attempts upon your life and that of your other step-son were self-evident, of course."

"Proof!" Richard Lorne repeated lifting his clenched right hand over his head only to let it fall impotently once more. "Christine! My poor Christine and her boy! And I've got to lie here like this! I can't make a move to find the —— —— fiend and get my hands about his throat! Sergeant, I'll give you anything in the world, all that I've got, if you'll find him for me and then let me have my way with him."

"It's my business to find him, sir; that's what I'm here for," Odell replied reassuringly. "You're not going to be useless in this investigation by any means simply because you are ill; you might be able to help me more than anybody. Mr. Lorne, you may not be conscious of it yourself, but there must have been something more than what we will call a psychic influence which made your conviction of foul play so strong. Think! Try to remember when the first misgivings came to you and what caused them. No matter how trivial it may seem to you, I want to hear it."

"It was something my poor wife said in her delirium, as I thought at the time. Later, after her death, it kept recurring to my mind, and I began to wonder whether she had actually been delirious after all when she spoke." For a moment Lorne turned his head away in an obvious effort to control his emotion. "It was just at dawn on the day before her death, and she had asked for me. The night nurse, Miss Risby, was still on duty; and my sister-in-law, worn out, was asleep on the couch at the other side of the room.

"I sat down beside the bed and lifted my wife's hand, holding it close. She smiled faintly at me; then her eyes glittering with fever followed the Risby woman around the room. I had never liked that nurse; she was officious, and she seemed unwilling at any time to leave me alone with my wife. Now she kept pottering about, moving bottles and rattling the cracked ice until I thought I should shout. Then she picked up a blanket and went over to the couch to place it about Effie—Miss Meade—and the moment her back was turned my wife's hand tightened on mine. 'Dick,' she whispered, 'send her away. Don't let her come in here any more. She's killing me.' I tried to soothe her, thinking of course that she was off her head; but she clawed at my hand, and the most piteous expression came over her poor face.

"'Oh, won't you believe? Isn't there going to be any help for me? I'm not crazy, Dick dear, I know. She pretends to be kind, but she makes me suffer more all the time, and there's something—something diabolical in her eyes. For God's sake, keep her away from me! I tell you she means my death!'"

For an instant there swept across the detective's mind that sentence uttered by Gerda: "Watch their eyes!" Was it of Miss Risby that she had been trying to warn him? But Miss Risby had already gone. . . .

"Mr. Lorne, did your wife mention Miss Risby's name? Could she not have been speaking of the day nurse?"

"No. Her eyes were fixed on the Risby woman all the time; and when she turned and came toward the bed my wife shrank back in her pillows as far as she could get, holding to my hand with all her feeble strength. 'Dick,'

she cried out, and her voice was hoarse with terror, 'I implore you! Do what I ask! I am not mad, I *know!*' Then that confounded nurse intervened and practically ordered me from the room, and like a fool I went. My poor wife's eyes had been so wild, her words so incredible, and her manner so violent, that it did not occur to me for a moment that she could be in full possession of her faculties. I supposed as a matter of course that it was all a mere figment of her disordered imagination.

"When I look back now, Sergeant, I could kill myself. I feel as guilty as though I myself had caused her death. My God, if I had only listened and believed!" He threw his sound arm up across his eyes and for a space lay very still. When at last his arm dropped to his side once more the detective saw the traces of tears on his fat cheeks.

"Yet I have nothing even now against that nurse except my poor wife's accusation; and I would hesitate to accuse any woman of so vile and purposeless a crime. It is only that I could not put those words from my thoughts and they were the last my wife ever spoke to me. The next time I saw her she was raving in delirium; then the state of coma ensued which continued until the end. After her death I thought of mentioning my misgiving to the doctor; but I knew that he would not give it a moment's credence, and I tried to put it from my own mind. But I couldn't; I shall hear that pitiful, desperate appeal ringing in my ears while I live!"

"Did both the nurses leave immediately after Mrs. Lorne passed away?" Odell asked.

"Within a few hours; as soon as the undertaker had gone.

I wanted Miss Meade to keep the other one, Miss Brown, with her for a day or two, as she was so terribly broken up by my wife's death that I was afraid she would be ill herself; but she said that she wanted to be alone with me and the children. Of course Miss Risby could have had nothing to do with the further events which occurred here in this house; and I can't even now bring myself to suspect her of causing my wife's death, but that warning must have meant something. My poor wife must have known instinctively that she was being done to death, and mistakenly suspected the Risby woman. Then came the morning when we found Julian up there with his throat cut, and I began to feel that fear of a damnable conspiracy at work against all of us!"

"I think that your wife's words alone would have justified official investigation, Mr. Lorne," the detective remarked. "In view of the fact that the specialists themselves could not agree as to why she had not responded to treatment, they seem particularly significant."

"I know; but I thought I should only be laughed at, and I shrank from the idea of the notoriety which would ensue." Lorne flushed again. "I didn't even tell Titheredge of what my wife had said. He's a man of sound common sense with a trained legal mind; and when he ridiculed the suggestion that there could be anything more than coincidence in the two deaths, I realized the reception I would probably receive from the authorities if I went to them with my story. I was getting desperate, though, and I would have summoned you people that night before the portrait fell if Titheredge hadn't stopped me."

"How? Why should he have stopped you?" Odell

noted the change which came over the face of the injured man at his query.

"He said that my theory presupposed what he called an inside job; and the thought that suspicion should be directed against any of the family was too monstrous to be borne. I couldn't force myself to consider such a hideous possibility, great as was my inner conviction that those deaths were more than accidental. Then Gene came in with the letter, and the picture fell. After I saw the severed ends of the wire cable which had held it in place I knew that there could be no more dodging of the issue, no matter what it might bring to all of us."

"Until then you had absolutely nothing to sustain that conviction except what Mrs. Lorne had said in that last conversation with her? Nothing tangible, I mean. There were no circumstances connected with the death of your step-son which you considered suspicious, save the fact itself following so closely upon your wife's death?"

"Nothing. Julian was in a highly nervous condition. He had gashed himself badly only a day or two before while trying to shave, owing to the uncontrollable tremor of his hands. What proof have you, Sergeant, that he was murdered?"

A knock upon the door and the entrance of Doctor Adams saved Odell from the necessity of a reply, and with a promise to return later for a further conference he withdrew.

He was starting downstairs when the sound of Rannie's high, whining voice from the library made him pause. Now would be as good a time as any to examine the cripple's collection of medical books.

Half an hour later, when Doctor Adams emerged from his patient's room he came face to face with Barry Odell, and he noted the extreme gravity of the detective's countenance even before the latter asked abruptly:

"Doctor, will you give me the addresses of the two nurses who were in attendance upon Mrs. Lorne in her last illness?"

"Certainly, Sergeant." The physician looked the surprise and curiosity which he did not voice as he drew a note-book from his pocket. "Miss Brown's address is 720 West One-hundred-and-tenth Street, and Miss Risby—let me see—Miss Risby lives at the Hotel for Professional Nurses in Fifty-second Street."

"Have you employed them both on cases before? Do you know them well?"

"I've had them each on several cases but not together. I've known Miss Brown since she graduated and Miss Risby for about two years, and I can vouch for them both in every way." The physician hesitated. "You know that the Chief Medical Examiner has ordered an autopsy on Mrs. Lorne? It is to take place on Monday."

"I knew that one was contemplated," Odell responded. "I shall see you again there, Doctor. Thank you for the addresses."

He left the house and made his way first uptown to the residence of Miss Brown, but found that she was out on a case. As he had intended merely to sound her in a general way as to her opinion of her fellow nurse, her absence was of small moment, and he hurried downtown to the second address. Here fortune favored him; Miss Risby was in and would join him at once in the reception room.

While he waited, Odell's thoughts went back to that last

half hour in Rannie's room. The medical books he had found there were by no means confined in subject to spinal diseases. They had appeared rather to his unlearned eye to cover the whole field of materia medica; but one small volume in particular had given him food for thought. It was a treatise on diseases of the blood; and the chapter on septicemia had been faintly marked by the imprint of a thumb upon the margin, a small, delicate thumb, which had left a trace of aromatic grease upon the white surface of the page. The perfume had been distinctly noticeable when he opened the book. Was this another evidence of the strange carelessness which had characterized each phase of this astonishing series of crimes?

"Mr. Odell?" A quiet, self-contained voice at his side roused him from his thoughts; and the detective rose to find confronting him a tall, slender girl with wide-set, intelligent gray eyes, and masses of pale golden hair bound severely around her small head.

"Sergeant Odell, from Police Headquarters," he corrected her pleasantly but in a lowered tone, with a cautious glance about the deserted reception room. "We are investigating the murder of Mrs. Richard Lorne."

If he had hoped by the abruptness of the statement to shake the girl from her attitude of serene composure he was doomed to disappointment.

"Murder?" she repeated, regarding him thoughtfully. "Do you mean it has been decided that she was murdered?"

"You were in nightly attendance upon her, I understand, Miss Risby; and yet you do not seem surprised," Odell observed significantly.

"Because I am not. It would be too much to say that

I actually suspected my patient was being done to death; but I could not understand why she did not rally under the treatment. My own impressions were too vague for me to approach the physician in charge with them, but they were strong enough to make me take every precaution possible during my hours on duty. I am heartily glad that an investigation is to be made."

"Every precaution," the detective repeated; and a light broke suddenly over him. "Is that why you would not leave Mrs. Lorne alone with her husband?"

A slight flush came into the girl's face, but her eyes met his steadily.

"Yes, Sergeant Odell. She was in my charge, and I did not think it wise. I have no proof; I make neither explanation nor defense of my conduct. It was my prerogative to deny my patient any communication, even with members of her family, which might prove harmful to her in her condition, and I exercised it."

"But you permitted her sister to be almost constantly with her; you must have had some especial reason for denying that privilege to Mr. Lorne."

The girl hesitated, but only for a moment. Then she said slowly:

"If you understood the ethics of my profession and the position in which we nurses stand in relation to the physician in charge of a case, you would realize why I have mentioned this to no one until now. I noticed that Mrs. Lorne grew rapidly worse after each interview alone with her husband; and on at least one occasion I am sure, although I cannot prove it, that the bandage upon her hand

and arm had been tampered with. Because of that lack of proof I dared not mention the matter to Doctor Adams, but I did my best to protect my patient; until the hour of her death she was never, during my hours on duty, alone again with Mr. Lorne."

CHAPTER XVII

FARLEY DREW'S GAME

FOR a moment after Miss Risby's veiled but unmistakably significant statement Odell stared at her while this new and amazing possibility swept over his consciousness. Was the girl lying, deliberately attempting to throw suspicion on Lorne, even as he had an hour before practically accused her?

The detective was forced to admit to himself that she did not appear to be the type of woman who would commit herself in any way without due cause and after careful consideration; yet she had said more than the situation demanded. She might easily have taken refuge in the excuse that she thought Mr. Lorne's presence, or that of any other member of the family except Miss Meade, excited her patient; she need not have volunteered that observation about the bandage.

"You are absolutely sure in your own mind that the bandage was tampered with?" he asked.

The girl shrugged.

"Doctor Adams would tell you that the patient might very well have loosened it in changing her position in bed; but I had applied it myself, and I knew that it had been removed and replaced."

"Did you examine it, Miss Risby? Was there anything

upon it or in the infected spot itself which suggested that some foreign matter might have been introduced?"

"No; I could not say that," she replied conscientiously. "The irritation and consequent suppuration had materially increased, and the patient's temperature had risen; but I found no trace of poison, if that is what you mean."

"Will you tell me all the circumstances, please? Was anyone else near Mrs. Lorne on that occasion?"

"No. Miss Meade was sleeping on the day bed in the boudoir adjoining, but she never stirred until I awakened her at midnight. She was utterly worn out and had gone to rest immediately after dinner on the evening in question, which was five days before Mrs. Lorne's death.

"I was alone with my patient when about nine o'clock Mr. Lorne knocked upon the door and I admitted him. After a few minutes I left him quietly talking to his wife; and requesting him not to remain more than twenty minutes, I went to my own room, where I wrote a letter. In exactly the time I had stipulated I returned and found that he had gone, and my patient was in the condition which I have described.

"I looked in the boudoir and saw that Miss Meade was still sleeping, and when I awakened her later I learned she had heard no one in her sister's room. I asked Mrs. Lorne herself if anyone had touched the bandage, but she denied it and seemed resentful. She was not a particularly easy patient to handle, being high-strung and self-indulgent to a degree; and it was essential that she should not be permitted to excite herself, so I dared not question her further."

The quiet, unemotional voice had continued without emphasis or hesitation until the end; and now the girl sat

composedly awaiting the next question. Could she have anticipated this scene and carefully rehearsed it? Her poise seemed all at once too perfect not to have been studied.

"Miss Risby, there must have been something else to arouse your suspicions. You would not, in the ordinary performance of your duty, prevent a man from having a private interview with his dying wife merely because on an earlier visit of his the bandage about her arm had become loosened and her fever increased."

The shot told, as he could note by the sudden tightening of the girl's lips; but she shook her head.

"You forget that the irritation of the infected area had also increased and to an alarming extent. It—it looked to me, Sergeant Odell, like a deliberate reinfection. I cannot even under the present circumstances discuss the private affairs of a family whose household I enter in a professional capacity, and I do not pretend to hazard any motive for such a possible act on Mr. Lorne's part; my only duty was toward my patient and I fulfilled it to the best of my ability."

"Yet you did learn something of the private affairs of that family." Odell seized upon the opening she had unwittingly given to him. "You do know or suspect a possible motive on Mr. Lorne's part for such a crime. Miss Risby, there are certain occasions when professional ethics must be put aside. The truth will not bring Mrs. Lorne back to life, but it may save others from dying as she did."

"Others?" The girl was startled from her serene composure at last. "What do you mean, Sergeant Odell? Surely there have been no further cases!"

"You encountered all the members of the family during your stay, did you not?"

She nodded wordlessly.

"You have heard of the subsequent death of Mrs. Lorne's oldest son, Julian Chalmers?"

"No!" she cried. "I have been on a contagious case in quarantine for the last fortnight. That splendid, robust young man! I—I can scarcely believe it! How—how did he die?"

"He was murdered in an even more ruthless fashion than was his mother. We have absolute proof of that and the manner of it; and two later unsuccessful attempts have been made upon other members of the family." Odell paused. "You see now, Miss Risby, that no ethical question must seal your lips. In the case of Mrs. Lorne, I may tell you that Doctor Adams as well as the specialists are convinced that death was not the direct result of the prick of that needle; and they are coöperating with me in every way. I must ask you to be equally frank."

"Oh, I don't know what to do!" The girl's hands twisted together in her lap. "Nursing isn't only a business with me; it is almost a sacred calling, and I have always striven to uphold its tenets scrupulously. There can be nothing more despicable than a woman who enters a home in the intimate, confidential capacity of a nurse and tattles of the personal, private matters which inevitably come under her observation; and yet if it is a question of preventing crime, I realize that I have no choice. Only if Mr. Lorne is innocent I am doing a terrible thing in this betrayal of my trust!"

"If Mr. Lorne is innocent the truth cannot hurt him," the detective urged. "Circumstantial evidence alone cannot

avail in a case of this sort, and where no possible motive appears—"

"But that is just it," Miss Risby interrupted him. "I am afraid that what I have to tell you will seem to establish a motive, yet I must speak. On the day before the episode of which I have just told you Miss Brown had a sore throat, and I assumed her duties as well as my own; Mrs. Lorne was not then so critically ill, you know. In the afternoon she was resting easily, and I thought it safe to take a nap if I remained within call. I went to the day bed in the boudoir and fell asleep almost at once, but was awakened by the sound of my patient's voice raised in shrill anger.

"I started up to go to her, my first thought being to curb her excitement, but when I heard Mr. Lorne's voice I hesitated. I did not mean to listen, but after the first few words I decided that it would save them from embarrassment if I did not appear; for their argument was about finances and of a most private nature.

"Mr. Lorne was urging his wife to sign some sort of paper which would enable him to sell a certain piece of property in which I gathered she had equal rights; and she vehemently refused. I cannot repeat the exact words; but it was evident that he was in financial straits, and he complained bitterly of his position in practically living on the money she had inherited from her first husband—of whom he spoke in a decidedly uncomplimentary manner—while there remained property of his own which would carry him safely over some crisis in the stock market and turn the tide, if his wife would only sign the document.

"She declared that the property in question was bound to increase in value, and if he had been a fool and got him-

self into a hole he must take the consequences; that she had always hated his gambling in Wall Street, and had warned him that he would fail sooner or later; and it might as well come now while her private fortune was sufficient for all their future needs. He swore that he would not live on her money; and she asked him sneeringly what he was going to do about it. She resented the slurs cast upon her first husband; and Mr. Lorne was furious at her ridicule of his lack of judgment in playing the market.

"A violent quarrel ensued in which he cursed himself for marrying a selfish, self-willed woman who had been spoiled all her life, and vowed that he would find some way to regain independent control of his own property. He asserted in no uncertain terms that she wanted him to fail, in order to place him under further obligations and make him a slave to her slightest whim, and that he—he would see her dead first."

The girl's voice had sunk lower and lower until the final words came in a mere whisper, and she shuddered as if shrinking from their very utterance.

"Did Mrs. Lorne still refuse?" Odell asked.

"Yes; and he left in a towering rage, while she merely laughed at him in a tantalizing way. Aside from the question, which was none of my affair, I must confess that I felt a certain amount of sympathy for Mr. Lorne at the moment. Mrs. Lorne was a very beautiful woman, but her disposition was not an easy one with which to get along; and I had already experienced her almost maniacal outbursts of temper over the merest trivialities.

"However, when I returned to the sick-room after dinner that evening I found him again with her, and they seemed

to have established amicable and even affectionate relations once more; so I thought no further about the scene of the afternoon until on the following night, when immediately after his customary visit with her I found her condition so changed."

"And this is all you have to tell me?" Odell rose. "You can recall nothing else which might have a possible bearing on Mrs. Lorne's death?"

"Nothing," Miss Risby responded as she gave him her hand. "Please do not attach too much significance to what I have told you, Sergeant. I have witnessed many domestic quarrels, and it has been my experience that people say a great deal in the heat of anger which it would be ridiculous to attach any importance to. I have told you only because I thought it my duty; but I beg that you will not accept my statement as conclusive proof."

Leaving her, Odell returned as quickly as possible to the Meade house. With every turn he seemed to be unearthing fresh and conflicting circumstantial evidence, and he felt that before proceeding any further he must gather up some of the loose threads which entangled this most perplexing of all the cases he had known.

When Peters admitted him he proceeded directly to the third floor and found Porter seated on a chair in the hall outside Gene's door yawning over a newspaper, which he cast aside with a quickly suppressed grin at sight of his superior.

"I'm glad you got back, Sergeant," he observed with an innocent air which told the detective plainly that the tale of his abduction had filtered through from Headquarters dur-

ing his absence. "Nothing stirring in there; been sulking ever since the night before last."

"Has he communicated with anyone outside the house or received any messages?"

"No. He sends his trays away almost untouched after each meal; and when Miss Meade came to the door he refused to let her in. Moreover, from that little room there I can hear him walking the floor most of the night. He hasn't taken the least notice of me; don't seem to care whether I'm on the job or not. It looks as if he was waiting for something to drop on him."

"Well, he won't have to wait any longer."

Odell knocked upon the door, and after a perceptible pause slow, reluctant footsteps sounded within, and Gene appeared on the threshold. His face was pale and drawn, and the circles beneath his sunken eyes told of sleepless hours; but to the detective's keen gaze there seemed to be a new look of strength and resolution about his weak mouth.

For a moment he stood eyeing Odell steadily but quite without animosity. Then he asked quietly:

"Do you want me?" There was a significance beyond the mere words in his tone, and the detective shook his head smilingly as he replied:

"I want only to have a little talk with you, Mr. Chalmers, if I may."

"Come in, Sergeant." Gene held the door wide, and Odell walked past him to a chair by the table. "I'll tell you anything you want to know now."

"You have not heard from your friend Farley Drew since

you left him the night before last in the room behind that tailor's shop on Third Avenue?"

"No." Gene closed the door and came slowly forward. "You were there? You heard?"

"I was in the alley," Odell admitted. "Your friend should see to it that the window is not broken or the shade torn, if he wishes to hold a strictly private conversation."

Gene drew a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"I'm glad you did hear, Sergeant; that simplifies matters. And please don't call that scoundrel a friend of mine; he is the worst enemy a man could have. I wish I had told you everything before, but I was afraid of him. Now I know that nothing he can do to me will be any worse than the torture I have gone through for the last two days; and at least I shall be rid of him forever! Do you remember that note you found in my desk and took away; I mean the one in which he ordered me to do something before the sixth of the month?"

"Yes. He mentioned it to me after you and Sims had taken your departure that night. We had a most interesting conversation in the room with the broken window." The detective paused and then added slowly: "You had—er—signed your mother's name to a check, and Farley Drew had cashed it; hadn't he? Was the second one drawn on her also?"

"So Drew told you?" The young man was white to the lips.

"No; I guessed. I had heard you accuse him of bleeding you; I recalled the wording of the note, and I put two and two together."

"Well, it's true! I'm not going to deny it, and I'll face

my stepfather and the family or—or anyone else you like." There was a sort of quiet desperation in his tones, with no trace of bravado. "Ever since I can remember I have been able to copy people's handwriting without any practice, and so nearly perfect that they could not themselves tell it from their own. I used to do it for fun at school when I was a kid. It was a gift from the devil, I guess; but I never thought of turning it to account in any dishonest way until Drew found out about my freakish ability in that line and put the idea into my head.

"Don't misunderstand me, Sergeant; I'm not trying to hide behind his skirts. I forged my mother's name to that check, and I am willing to take the consequences. Drew had me in a hole; racing, and gambling, and chits signed at restaurants for supper parties, and all the rest of it. He had a stack of I. O. U. paper of mine about a foot high. My stepfather had paid up my debts twice; and he refused to do so again, and I knew he meant it.

"Of course I shall be of age in another month and master of my inheritance from my own father; but Drew wouldn't wait. The notes were long overdue; and he was pressing me, and threatening until I was almost crazy."

Only another month? Odell's thoughts were far afield. Mrs. Lorne had refused to sign away her rights to certain property, and she had died; Julian had demanded an accounting of his estate, and he also had perished. Gene would be of age in four short weeks; and it was obvious that he, too, would want control of his inheritance—and that portrait had all but crushed out his life when it fell! All this capital had been intrusted to Richard Lorne's keeping. . . . With an effort the detective forced himself to con-

centrate on the matter in hand. "Why couldn't Drew wait one month more?"

"I didn't know then. He always seemed prosperous, though I fancied he was sailing pretty close to the wind himself. I hadn't the faintest idea of his real motive. I owed him all told about twelve thousand dollars; but he said he would return all my notes and call it square if I would get ten thousand for him then, and he told me how it could be done."

"When was this, Mr. Chalmers?"

"About six weeks ago. I needn't tell you what a rotter I felt, forging my mother's name; but I knew she would save me from exposure if the worst came to the worst, even though she had agreed with my stepfather not to let me have another cent; and I could pay her back as soon as I came into my own money. Of course I didn't dream then what was coming; and she died without ever knowing what I had done.

"I made the check out to myself, endorsed it, and gave it to Farley Drew; and he returned all my notes. But when Dad and old Titheredge were settling up her estate after her death, the check didn't come back from the bank with those my mother herself had drawn. I didn't know what to make of it, and was in a blue funk for fear the people at the bank had discovered the forgery and were investigating it quietly. I went to Farley Drew, and then for the first time learned the sort of man he was, and how I had put myself in his power.

"Sergeant, he was in no such need of ready money as I had imagined; he had not cashed that check, nor had he ever intended to do so. He was going to hold it over my

head, and when I came into my own money bleed me of every cent! I didn't grasp all that at first; it came to me gradually later. He said he had not cashed the check himself, but had given it to someone else; and that it had gone through the bank all right, and there must have been some mistake about its not having been returned with the others. I would have believed him; but just then he sprung his real game on me.

"He had paid my debts for me, accepted my notes, and held them when they were long overdue without making any trouble for me, and now in common decency I must help him out; that was the way he put it, but I was on in a minute and saw the trap I had walked into.

"He was in immediate need of five thousand more, must have it by the sixth of the month, and I must get it for him as I had the ten thousand. My mother was gone; but Dad would honor her check if I made it out carefully enough to pass muster. I could endorse it over, not to Drew, but to a friend of his who runs a private card-club, and who would stand in with us to the extent of presenting it to Titheredge for payment, and would then turn the money over to Drew for a liberal commission. This man was not to know that the check was a forgery, of course. He was to be told that I owed the money to Drew and that my mother had agreed to lend me the required sum until I came of age; that I did not want my family to know I had borrowed any more money from Drew; so he was to say that it was a gambling debt which I owed to *him,* and to threaten exposure if it were not paid.

"This was the brilliant plan which Farley Drew had concocted for his first levy of blackmail upon me, Sergeant;

but it didn't work. I was a coward and a rotter to steal from my own mother when she was alive, even though I could return it so soon; but with her dead and her body scarcely cold in the grave I—I couldn't! I defied him, and he saw he had gone too far; but he has been stalling along ever since.

"That last meeting was the end. I told him that I knew his game and he could go as far as he liked; he would never get another penny out of me by fair means or foul; and if he intended to use that check to expose me I would anticipate him. I swore I would go to Dad and old Titheredge and tell them the truth, and they could do what they wanted to with me; at least I would be out of his clutches. I suppose he means to sell them that check for about five times its face value; but I don't care if they refuse! I don't care if the whole world knows; for it couldn't condemn me half as bitterly as I condemn myself!" Gene's voice broke suddenly, and he buried his face in his hands. "Oh, if my mother only understands and forgives!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"READY TO ANYONE'S HAND"

ODELL waited until the young man's emotion had spent itself and then he asked gently:

"Have you told your stepfather?"

"Not yet. He's been mighty square and patient with me; and I cannot forget how he loved my mother. Now that he is injured and grief-stricken, and has all this hideous affair on his hands besides, I can't bear to add to his suffering by having him know that there is a criminal in the family. Don't think that I am trying to hedge, Sergeant," Gene added. "I am only too anxious to get the burden of what I've done off my shoulders; but—but it seems like hitting a man when he is down to go to him with such a confession now."

"Then if you will accept a word of advice, if I were you I would go to Mr. Titheredge, and tell him everything at the earliest possible moment. You cannot tell when Drew may make up his mind to strike; and you must be prepared," Odell said gravely. "You are right not to disturb your stepfather with the story now: he does seem to be very much broken up by your mother's death; and Mr. Titheredge tells me that their married life was ideal."

He had added this boldly mendacious statement as a feeler, and Gene responded to it.

"Dad loved mother to distraction, and she was just as crazy about him; but they were forever quarreling. A lot old Titheredge knows about it!" he smiled faintly. "Their quarrels didn't amount to anything, though: you'd think they were going to kill each other one minute, and the next they'd be as happy as ever! Dad has a high temper, but mother—! She was as quick as lightning to flare out, and just as quick to forgive and take a fellow to her heart again.

"That was why I was sure that, although she would be simply wild of course, when she found out about the check, she would cover it up and protect me from the consequences. I don't care now; nothing matters except that I'd like to see Farley Drew get what is coming to him."

"But you will take my advice?"

"Yes, Sergeant, and I cannot thank you enough for the consideration you have shown me; I don't deserve it, but I can tell you that this whole awful affair has taught me a lesson." Gene looked straight into Odell's eyes. "I told you at our first meeting that you could count on me to do anything I could to help you find out who is back of this conspiracy to kill us all, and you can. I haven't an idea who it is; I can scarcely bring myself to think of it, the possibilities are so horrible. One thing is certain: God knows I hate Farley Drew; but he could have had nothing whatever to do with it. I would stake my life on that. May I go to Titheredge now? I'll take Porter along with me; he is too good company to leave trailing behind."

Odell smiled and held out his hand.

"Go along if you like, Mr. Chalmers. I'm glad that we have had this understanding, and I may call upon you for help sooner than you think. Tell Mr. Titheredge that you

came to him on my advice, and that I want everything about the affair kept as quiet as possible in the interests of the case upon which I am at work."

The younger man flushed as they shook hands.

"Thank you, Sergeant Odell. You can trust me now."

As he made his way down to the second floor the detective congratulated himself that his supposition in regard to the forgery had been verified and some headway had been gained at last in the process of elimination. Gene and Farley Drew were definitely erased from his list of suspects, and the motive for Lorne's possible guilt loomed large.

Another factor, minor but significant, presented itself for his consideration. Kenny, the boss carpenter who had received that mysterious telephone summons to rehang the portrait, said that the voice which spoke to him was "gruff-like and rasping but not real deep." Lorne's tones were hoarse, but throaty rather than low and heavy. It seemed the wildest improbability that he would telephone such a message knowing the comment it would arouse in the household when the men appeared to do their work; but this was merely another of the irreconcilable inconsistencies which Odell had encountered at every turn and which must be left for explanation until the final solution.

He had intended to pay a second visit to Lorne; but as he passed Rannie's door he hesitated, and then turned back and knocked.

The familiar high, querulous tones bade him enter, and he found the hunchback seated by the window with a huge leather-bound volume in his shrunken, clawlike hands.

"Well, Sergeant, are you hot on the trail?" There was a trace of the habitual sneer in the boy's voice; but Odell ob-

served that he laid aside the book as if not ill-pleased with the interruption. "Have you come to tell me that you have discovered the family Nemesis?"

"Scarcely that. I want to ask you precisely the same question which you put to me at our last interview." The detective smiled pleasantly. "What do you think of the maid, Gerda?"

Rannie's eyes narrowed.

"I thought we had dismissed Gerda from further discussion, but my opinion of her coincides with your own: I think she is a very superior sort of maid."

"You know as well as I do that she is far above the position which she has voluntarily assumed here." Odell was still smiling, but a peremptory note had crept into his tones. "But you know more than I; you know what her game is in this house."

Rannie threw back his head with a burst of ironic laughter.

"So one of your zealous sleuths was on the job this morning when I was kidding her, was he? I'm sorry to disappoint you, Sergeant; but I don't know any more than you do about her. She's just one of the army of reduced gentlewomen forced to earn their own living, unfitted for anything but a position of this sort, and too proud to play the game like a sport. It amuses me to take her down a peg now and then; that is all."

The detective advanced to the chair upon which Rannie had placed the book, and picking it up he seated himself and laid it carelessly on his knee.

"You told her that you would not give her away because you did not want the 'fun' spoiled; and you warned her

that I was no fool and she had better copy Jane's speech the next time I interviewed her. It won't do, my boy. I've got to have the truth."

"Then ask her." Rannie shrugged. "Granted that she may have an ulterior motive, and that I have an inkling of it; you will be making the mistake of your budding career if you try to connect her with our trouble. She is not after our lives, nor the family plate, I can assure you; but further than that, Sergeant, I have nothing to say. Her little game won't hurt any of us, and it is the only oasis of diversion in the desert in which I live. Let her play it out and stick to your own side of the court. I guess you know already that you'll have your hands full."

"Perhaps," Odell conceded good-naturedly. "If the woman isn't up to the sort of mischief that would bring her officially under our notice, the authorities aren't interested in her. There are a few other points I would like to settle in my own mind. Hello, what is this? A medical book?"

He had glanced down as if inadvertently at the volume which he held on his knee, and read the title: "Reference Handbook of the Medical Sciences."

The boy's dark, saturnine face flushed, and he thrust out an imperious hand.

"Give it to me!" he demanded.

"You are interested in this sort of thing?" the detective asked as he complied. He had darted a swift glance at the delicate, pointed thumb of the extended hand, and then his eyes traveled to the bookcases which lined the wall. "You have quite a young library here on medicine, haven't you?"

"I like it. You'd think I would have had enough of surgery and braces and nostrums since I've been the happy hunting-ground for so many futile experiments, but ever since I was a kid I've wanted to be a doctor," Rannie explained; adding with a bitter curl of his thin lips: "Fine ambition, isn't it, for a fellow with a back like a dromedary! It would be a case of 'Physician, heal thyself,' and I wouldn't have a comeback!"

"You might make a big success of it if you went in seriously for the study of medicine," Odell remarked, rising and sauntering over to the bookcase which held the little volume he had examined a few hours previously. "Your accident has not impaired the keenness of your brain nor the strength of your hands. One of the greatest physicians I know is under a far worse handicap; he is blind. . . . Mind if I have a look at one or two of these? There is something that has puzzled me—Ah, I think this will give me what I want."

He took the little volume from its place, and Rannie rose and crossed to his side.

"Oh, *that*," he said indifferently. "I think I know what you are driving at, Sergeant; and that won't help you. If the cause of my mother's last illness puzzled you, it puzzled Adams and the specialists a lot more, although they looked wise and called it blood-poisoning."

"Still, here is a chapter on septicemia"—Odell opened the book and carefully placed his own thumb over the telltale imprint on the margin.

"Merely superficial; and it has no business, properly speaking, in a treatise on diseases of the blood." Rannie clawed over the heap of books stacked upon the floor, and

unearthed a ponderous tome. "Here is what you want: 'Pathogenic Bacteria.' That covers the whole field. Take it along if you want to; but I don't believe you will find the cause of my mother's death lurking in any vegetable organisms."

"I'd like to take them both, if I may." Odell tucked them under his arm. "I don't know much about septicemia, or what poisons would produce it or its counterfeit. That was one of the points in which I fancy you could be of assistance to me."

"I?" The boy laughed again. "So that is how the wind blows, is it? I told you at our last interview that I wouldn't take the trouble to put any of the family out of the way; but I was evidently not convincing. I'll give you all the rope you want, Sergeant. As a matter of fact, I have been reading up and experimenting quite a bit lately on pathogenic bacteria; the bugs, you know, which produce, among other things, blood-poisoning. Damaging, isn't it, especially when I admit that I turned my attention to the subject some months before my mother's death?"

"Experimenting?" Odell repeated sharply. "Do you mean that you had the living specimens here?"

Rannie nodded coolly; but the detective noted a sudden quiver of his distorted face.

"Yes. I got them a month before my mother was taken ill. I have a friend, Phil Hampton, a young bacteriologist, who lets me fool around his laboratory when I feel able; and he taught me a lot. Lent me an incubator and gave me various forms of cocci to develop and experiment with from time to time."

"Did you have in your possession at the time of your

mother's illness the actual type of bacteria which would produce blood-poisoning?"

"I did. I had had them for two or three days. That was why, when my mother died and the specialists were still quarreling about why she had not responded to the treatment, I began to wonder if my incubator had been tampered with. But you will scarcely credit that, of course. What I am telling you must amount to a practical confession in your eyes."

"You are telling me this of your own free will, and I am accepting your statement in good faith," Odell replied slowly. "If you were guilty, why should you tell me so much and halt at an actual confession? You kept the incubator here in this room?"

"Yes. It had only to be kept at thirty-eight degrees centigrade—body temperature, you know—and I found the bacteria a fascinating study. They were a protection, too, from boredom; neither of the girls would venture into the room for fear something would escape and bite them. You would think I had an embryo menagerie here!"

"Did anyone else in the household evince the slightest interest in your experiments?"

"Lord, no! The servants didn't know anything about them; they merely had instructions not to touch the incubator. Gene never comes in here, and Dad would not even let me show them to him; said I was a fool to monkey with such things, and that there were enough nuisances in the world without bothering with trouble-makers which were so small you couldn't see them. As for Aunt Effie, I insisted upon talking to her about them just to tease her; but it distressed her so that I quit finally. I believe she thinks

that modern medical science is an invention of the devil to cheat the Divine Will of its prey. You see, Sergeant, we are up against a stone wall every way we turn."

"Tell me more about these bacteria," Odell urged. "You installed this incubator a month before your mother was taken ill, you say?"

"Approximately. I used agar-agar, the usual sterile culture medium; and the first bacteria that Hampton let me have were called *streptococcus viridans,* if it means anything to you. They produce blood-poison of the most virulent kind, and had my mother been infected with any of them death would have resulted almost immediately. Next I got from Hampton some *staphylococcus aureus;* and finally, two or three days before my mother pierced her finger with that needle, he told me to try some *staphylococcus albus.* They are the bacteria which would have produced the mild case of septicemia from which my mother seemed at first to be suffering, if the needle had been infected with them."

"Could that have been done practically?"

"By simply dipping the needle in the tube containing the culture-medium on the surface of which the bacteria were floating," Rannie replied. "They would remain alive for several hours at least; and the fact that the needle had been drawn repeatedly through the material on which my mother was embroidering would make no difference. Sterilization alone would have destroyed their effectiveness."

"Did your friend Hampton teach you all this?" asked the detective.

"No. He only showed me how to go about experimenting with them. I learned what I know about them from those books you have and a lot more of them over there." He

nodded toward the collection. "Anyone in the house could have had as easy access to them as to the incubator."

"Where is the incubator now?"

"I returned it to Hampton." Rannie flushed once more. "It makes the whole thing look pretty black against me, doesn't it? The fact is that after mother's death and I got brooding about it and wondering why she hadn't responded to the treatment I got a sort of horror of those wretched, infinitesimal things which could so easily have been the cause of it all. I threw out the bacteria, and sent the incubator back to Hampton; but I couldn't get the thought of them out of my mind.

"I know it was madness to even consider it; but, Sergeant, if anyone got at the incubator and infected that needle, they could as easily have gained access to it at any time during my mother's subsequent illness and reinfected her over and over again by a mere pin-prick." The boy's thin hands clenched. "That is the only possible way to account for her failure to rally under the treatment."

"Doctor McCutchen suggested that the incision made for drainage near the infected spot might have been reinfected by serum"—Odell was beginning, but the boy waved him to silence.

"That form of treatment is a special fad of his, but I know Doctor Adams doesn't subscribe to it. He knows of my interest in medical science, and he kept me informed of every detail of the case. An abscess did form near the puncture of the needle, but it was not necessary for him to lance it, and I know that no incision was made. As to the puncture itself, it would have been impossible to reinfect the blood through it because of the dead cells which the

poison itself had erected all about it, like a barricade; the blood could not circulate near it."

"You mean then that Mrs. Lorne could have been constantly reinfected by any sharp instrument that would pierce the skin anywhere on the body and convey the bacteria to the blood, just as she had been first infected?"

"Exactly. Neither Doctor Adams nor the specialists could have suspected the possibility of such a thing; and a pinprick would leave no noticeable trace. That was the idea which kept recurring to my mind. I told myself that I must be crazy to think of it; but then Julian died, and I could see my own fears reflected in the faces of the whole family. After that there came the two accidents to Gene and Dad, and that settled it."

"Why did you not tell me of all this before?" Odell looked straight into the boy's eyes. "When we had our first talk you said nothing about having the bacteria in your possession."

"I didn't want to get hauled off to jail on suspicion before I had an opportunity to do a little investigating on my own account; I wanted to discover if I could whether anyone had really been at my books or tampered with the bacteria in the incubator. You see, I hadn't much faith in your perspicacity, Sergeant; and I was under the impression that you would be in such a hurry to make out a case against the first person circumstantial evidence might point to that you wouldn't hesitate.—A fat lot of good it did for me to keep silent!" he added with a shrug. "I've thought the whole matter over in my mind, and tried to imagine each member of the family in turn as guilty; but it didn't work. I know their faults and shams to the last tiresome, petty weakness;

but it is simply impossible for me to convince myself that any of them could be capable of such a monstrous, unnatural crime."

"How did you expect to discover anything in these two days which would lead you to suspect the guilt of some member of the household?"

"Simply by studying them and asking unexpected questions; but, as I told you, it didn't get me anywhere. As an amateur detective, I am a failure; and now I've put it squarely up to you, Sergeant. The means of bringing about my mother's death was here, ready to anyone's hand; and the knowledge of how to make use of it was equally accessible. I have no proof that anyone did avail themselves of it, merely suspicion; and if the circumstantial evidence were twice as strong—"

"Strong!" A raucous but strangely exultant voice behind them caught up the word and repeated it with impish glee. "Strong! Nobody knows how strong I am!"

It was Socrates, dancing excitedly upon his perch and eyeing them obliquely with a knowing leer.

"Who taught the parrot to say that?" demanded the detective abruptly. It was the phrase which had first arrested Taylor's attention outside the closed door when that conscientious operative was searching the house for possible clues.

"Nobody. He's been harping on that for a month or more; but I never can tell how he manages to pick up half that he knows." Rannie laughed with a tinge of the old bitterness. "He certainly never heard me boasting of my physical prowess!"

"Is he ever taken out of this room?"

"No; but occasionally when I let him out of his cage, and the window is open, he gets out upon the ledge and walks along the cornice to Dad's room, looking for him. Dad is the only one in the family he has any use for, except me; probably because the old man hates him so cordially!"

"Parrots usually repeat a phrase which they have just acquired until the novelty wears off; do they not?"

"I suppose so; or until a new sentence impresses itself upon what minds they have," Rannie responded indifferently.

"Then any new phrase which Socrates repeats he must have learned in this room?" Odell persisted.

"Of course.—I say, what are you driving at?" The indifference was gone from the boy's tone. "You don't think—? But that sentence doesn't mean anything; it couldn't possibly have any connection with the case. No matter who Socrates is imitating, strength was no factor in my mother's death."

"But it was in both the attempted murders," the detective remarked. "Do you think, too, that your brother Julian permitted his razor to be wrested from him without a struggle? I wish our friend Socrates could be induced to talk some more."

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNDERWORLD PHOENIX

THE interview with Rannie had wrought a change in the detective's immediate plans, and he resolved not to hold any further conversation with Richard Lorne until he had secured additional data upon which to work. The theory first advanced by Miss Risby was now seemingly corroborated by several inadvertent statements of the crippled boy's, trivial in themselves but of importance when considered with the rest of the evidence.

Everything depended, of course, upon the establishment of a motive. But granted that there were no insurmountable obstructions to the theory, the possible means used to bring about the death of Mrs. Lorne was clear; and the idea which Odell had formed as to the murder of Julian would be as consistent whether Lorne or any other member of the household were guilty.

Then, too, Lorne as well as anyone else might have filed the heavy wire cables which held up the portrait, hoping to encompass Gene's death, and thus defer perhaps indefinitely the accounting of his inheritance which would have been demanded in another month. Titheredge was Lorne's life-long friend; and he as well as the latter's wife had doubtless been satisfied with the statements made from time to time of the administration of the various properties

without dreaming of the necessity of verifying them; statements which might very easily have been doctored by a desperate man who constantly hoped to recoup on the market and thus cover up his peculations.

At a first glance it had seemed inconceivable that the man should have sawed through the top step of the stairs and then deliberately have precipitated himself down them next morning; but on second thought Odell began to see the possibilities. Lorne might well have planned that episode to throw suspicion from himself in the inevitable investigation, meaning merely to roll down the stairs uninjured, and then have miscalculated his fall. If he were indeed guilty, his dissimulation to Titheredge and his professed determination to call in the police rebounded against him as evidence of his craftiness. He would have had ample time to tamper with the stairs after the attorney went to sleep, and by keeping him there as a guest his own alibi was established.

Then a quick revulsion of feeling came, and Odell reminded himself sternly that he had not one shred of real evidence against this man, nothing but the vague suspicions of the trained nurse and his own specious imaginings. Time above all things was essential in this case, and he could afford to waste none of it on idle speculations.

One seemingly inconsequential thought still rankled in his brain—the hint which the mysterious Gerda had given him concerning insanity. He knew better than to approach her now for further enlightenment, for he had read the finality in her manner during their first interview; but if he had some weapon to wield over her and force her confidence. . . . If he could learn her purpose there, discover the identity of the man upon whom she had looked

with murder in her eyes from the top of the stairs. . . .

A sudden inspiration flashed blindingly across his consciousness. If it could be true, it would explain much; and yet. . . .

"Sergeant, I think she's planning a getaway." Smith appeared suddenly before him.

"Who?" Odell roused himself from his meditations.

"Miss Cissie. She has been moving briskly back and forth in her room for the last hour, slamming bureau-drawers and the closet-door; and she is humming to herself as if she was mighty pleased over something. I thought I'd better let you know in case you were going out."

"All right. If she leaves the house trail her; and take Blake or Shaw along. By the way, what was the address of that apartment house she went to yesterday looking for that Mrs. Gael?"

"Number 120-A West Ninety-third Street. But what's the idea of taking Blake or Shaw along, Sergeant, if I trail Miss Cissie?"

"Because in the event that she keeps an appointment one of you will have to escort her home and the other take Farley Drew to Headquarters." Odell smiled. "That is the only date she will leave this house to keep, and it may be our best chance of locating him unless she had the right dope in going to that other woman's apartment yesterday. I'm going out now, but I'll be back before night in any event. Don't take your hand off your number for a minute, Smith."

In the lower hall, however, he was arrested as on a similar occasion two days before by the sound of youthful voices in the drawing-room, and after a moment's hesitation he knocked upon the door.

It was opened by Nan, the younger daughter of the house, and looking beyond her, Odell saw a tall, good-looking young man rise slowly from the davenport.

"Oh, did—did you want to see me?" The girl's tone was surprised and a trifle confused. "Is there anything that I can do?"

"Look here, is this Sergeant Odell?" The young man had advanced with a certain truculence in his manner.

"Yes, Tad." Nan turned again to the detective, and he noted the blush which crept up into her cheeks. "This is my—our neighbor, Mr. Traymore."

"I'd like a word with you, sir," young Mr. Traymore announced. "I'm a lawyer—at least I'm going to be—and I know enough about the legal side of an investigation like this to be assured that you can't keep the whole household prisoners here till you have made up your mind who is at the bottom of the things that have been going on—"

"Oh, Tad!" the girl interrupted in faint remonstrance.

"I mean what I say," Tad went on doggedly. "This man has got you all buffaloed, but they can't hold you in your own home on suspicion; they have got to get a warrant and arrest you, if they want you detained; and they must show some grounds for that. This young lady says that you have given orders no one is to leave the house."

"Not at all," Odell replied gravely, although his mouth twitched a bit at the corners. "Miss Chalmers is free to come and go as she wishes; but of course, under the circumstances, anyone who leaves the house will be strictly watched and guarded until their return."

"I don't mean that. I want Miss Chalmers to come to my mother's, next door, and stay. She isn't safe here; no

one is, after what has been going on, and you know it. If the others want to stick along and risk being killed, that is their own affair; but I'm not going to have Nan—Miss Chalmers—subjected to such danger."

"Indeed, Mr. Traymore. Have you any legal right to remove her? I understand that Miss Chalmers is not yet of age; does her guardian consent to her taking up her residence elsewhere?"

"I haven't asked him." Tad appeared slightly taken aback. "No one has a right to keep her where her life is in danger. She insists on staying to look after her stepfather, when any ordinary nurse could do that."

"I won't leave him, and that is all there is about it!" declared Nan with sudden spirit, her dark, gipsy-like face aglow. "I love Dad almost better than anybody in the world, and I won't run away while he is ill and needs me. Don't mind him, Sergeant Odell; we're always quarreling. Did you wish to talk to me?"

"Yes, for just a moment; but first I want to assure your friend that you are as safe here as constant care and watchfulness can make you. I do not think it would be wise for you to take up even a temporary residence elsewhere unless actual danger threatens you from a source which we cannot control; for others of the household might wish to avail themselves of the same privilege."

"In that case," said Tad, rising, "I suppose I had better take myself off. I hope, Sergeant, that you will be able to take care of her; but it is a horrible thing to think of her being here! Good-by, Nan."

Woman-like, she permitted him to get as far as the entrance door before she ran after him, and the detective

smiled in spite of himself. There had been an engaging quality about the young man's boyish yet very earnest outburst, which had enabled Odell to read his character more clearly than hours of grilling examination would have revealed; and he felt with relief that here at least was one person more or less intimately connected with the household whose complexities need not be taken into account.

Nan returned as the front door thudded, her soft eyes sparkling and the dusky roseglow still suffusing her face; but color and light alike died from her expression as she closed the door carefully behind her and approached the detective.

"Rannie says that you have proof that my mother—". Her voice faltered and stopped. Then suddenly a swift cry burst from her lips. "Is it true that they were murdered, my mother and Julian?"

"I am afraid there is no possibility of a doubt," Odell returned gravely. "I have heard all that the rest of the family and the servants can tell me, Miss Chalmers; and now I have come to you. You experienced the same fears, the same vague suspicions as the others after your brother's death, did you not?"

"Yes, but I didn't really suspect; none of us did, I'm sure. I only felt nervous and afraid of something I couldn't see, as if I were a little bit of a girl again and woke up in the dark." She drew a deep breath. "I cannot imagine who would wish to harm us; I can scarcely believe that this dreadful thing is true. But, but granted that it is, the most awful part is that someone beneath our roof—"

Her voice had sunk to a mere whisper and once more it failed her.

"I realize how difficult it is for you to face, but there is no alternative." The detective spoke very gently. "Some one of the household is guilty, and it is my business to discover the identity of that person before another tragedy comes. I will not distress you by asking for details which the others have already given me of the events of the past month; but there is just one question I should like to put to you, and I want you to think back very carefully before you reply. Can you recall the slightest incident, the most trivial remark on the part of anyone, no matter who, which might lead you now to think that they possessed some personal knowledge of the truth?"

For a moment Nan reflected, while Odell watched the ever-changing play of expression on her childishly mobile face. The mingling of horror and grief gave place to a look of forced concentration, as if, in obedience to his request, she was indeed reviewing each tragic episode in her mind and striving to recall a possible clue. All at once a startled gleam quivered like a flame from her eyes and she caught her breath sharply. Then the light dulled and she shook her head.

"No, Sergeant Odell. There was nothing, nothing that anyone said or did at any time which could have made me think such a thing."

Ten minutes later as the detective went briskly down the steps of the house he mentally catalogued that flitting expression for future reference. It was the only point which his interview with Nan Chalmers had elicited, yet it was a pregnant one. She *had* remembered something, some act or word on the part of one of those about her which con-

veyed a startling possibility to her mind, and she had as quickly and instinctively hidden it from him.

After a hasty lunch he made his way to the address which Smith had given him, and found himself facing a somber, old-fashioned apartment house of the cheaper grade, one of a long row identical with it which stretched the length of the block. He entered the vestibule, scrutinized the soiled cards inserted in the slots below the mail-boxes, and at length rang the janitor's bell.

After an interval heavy, shuffling footsteps sounded from within and the door opened, disclosing a fat, middle-aged woman with a good-natured if somewhat loose-lipped smile, which froze at sight of the stranger.

"If you've got me up all them stairs to try to sell me somethin'—", she began, but Odell cut her short.

"I haven't. I'm looking for a Mrs. Gael who used to live here, and if you can tell me anything which will help me to locate her I will make it worth your while."

The woman sniffed.

"Process-server?"

"No; a friend of hers." Odell smiled. "We've been unable to find out where she went from here, and it occurred to me that possibly you would know if you are the janitress. She has simply dropped from the sight of all her friends."

"Well, I wouldn't wonder." The woman sniffed again. "I guess if I had to be took off to a place like that I wouldn't want folks to know, either. Not that you'd ever have thought it for a minute to look at her or talk to her; but if I'd known she wasn't right you'd never have got me alone there in the flat with her."

"Wasn't right!" Odell repeated when he could stem the flow of words. "What sort of a place was she taken to?"

"A loon'tic asylum!" the woman replied with morbid relish. "You could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard it. She told me she was goin' to a san'tarium to rest, though she hadn't done nothin' while she lived here but moon around the house; and she had hardly any callers, only one gentleman as I know of, and him not often. It's funny her friends didn't look her up before, if they was so concerned about her."

"But where was she taken? What sanitarium?" The detective's thoughts were racing now. "On whose advice did she go?"

"How should I know? I ain't never one to poke my nose in the tenants' affairs. She was sad-like when she came, and she kept gettin' droopier and droopier as time went on, but she was always soft-spoken and quiet, and I never saw her do anythin' funny; no more did Agnes, her girl that come in by the day. Except for her, Mis' Gael was all alone. It was after that gentleman who called now and again had been here for the next to the last time that Mis' Gael sent for me and told me she was goin' away to the san'tarium, but she'd be back in a few weeks. She left the next day, and my man helped put her trunk in the taxi. That very afternoon a movin'-van backed up to the door, and the boss of it showed me an order to take out all her things and put them in storage. Her rent was paid up in advance till the end of her lease, so I had nothin' to say; and I ain't heard of her since."

"Who told you that the sanitarium to which Mrs. Gael

was taken was a lunatic asylum?" Odell drew a wallet from his pocket and ostentatiously selected a bill.

"The gentleman, sir; the one that used to call on her." With an effort the woman wrenched her fascinated gaze from the wallet. "I never did hear his name, but I guess he was a relation. He come in that afternoon before the movin' men was through, just as I was havin' words with the boss of them about scratchin' my hall wall-paper, and he drew me to one side and told me Mrs. Gael was crazy. He said she had been for a long time, and her family had made up their minds now to put her where maybe she'd be cured. You could have knocked me down—"

"What was this gentleman like?"

"Well, about forty, sir, I guess. Kind of handsome he was; but he looked like he'd done most everything there is and a lot of it hadn't agreed with him. He was a gentleman, though; you'd only to look at his clothes and that elegant scarf-pin to tell that. Not that it would be my taste to be wearin' a thing shaped like a skull—"

"A skull?" repeated the detective.

"The pin, sir. Some kind of a pearl, it looked like, and it must have cost a lot of money, but it was just the shape of a skull. It give me a turn to look at it." The woman paused for breath and then rattled on: "Well, after the gentleman talked to me he went up to the flat where Agnes was wonderin' what was goin' to happen next; and he told her just what he told me. After he'd gone she came down and said he had got her a fine job out in Chicago and given her the money to get there. I guess she went; for I ain't seen her again, either."

"When did all this happen?"

"About nine months ago, sir. The flat's rented again now to a family named—"

"Never mind." Odell pressed the bill into her hand. "I think Mrs. Gael's friends will be able to locate her now."

"Thank you, sir. There was a young lady here askin' for her yesterday, too, my man tells me. I hope Mrs. Gael gets well; there's a lot that's crazier-actin' than her walkin' around loose."

Odell glanced at his watch as he descended the steps. It was a quarter to three. If he made a quick subway connection he would reach the financial district just in time to catch Dilke—

As he returned the watch to his pocket he glanced idly at a figure loitering by the curb and his train of thought snapped. The figure was shabby and uncouth, and the eyes which stared out at him from the thin, sickly yellow countenance were deeply sunken. The man uttered a low imprecation and turned to run; but in another moment Odell's hand gripped his shoulder and swung him about so that they stood face to face.

"Well, Tony! So you weren't burned, after all, when you set fire to the boathouse!" The grip tightened. "Why did you kill Pete?"

"I didn't! Honest to Gawd, I didn't!" Tony cringed. "When I woke up he was sittin' there dead in the chair, an' you an' de other guy was gone. So help me Gawd!"

"Come along and tell that to the Old Man down at Headquarters." Odell signaled a passing taxi, and thrusting in his cowering captive he followed. "Two-forty Center Street, and step on the gas!"

As the chauffeur obeyed Tony passed a shaking hand across his unshaven lips.

"I'm wise dat I gotta do a stretch for stickin' up youse an' de other guy an' keepin' youse hid in dat boathouse, but I never croaked Pete."

"There'll be a little charge of incendiarism tacked on that will hold you on another count, too, my friend," Odell promised grimly.

"Come again?"

"Burning down that boathouse to conceal the body."

"Nottin' doin'. Dat was a accident. De dope got to Pete, an' when I see he's croaked I falls back against dat table an' over goes de lamp. I'm still cloudy from de dope an' all I got sense enough ter do is beat it.—Say, mister," Tony leaned forward slyly, "if youse was wise dat Pete was dead before youse an' de other guy made your get-away, youse are hep dat I didn't croak him; an' it's a safe bet Pete an' me didn't drag youse an' yer look-out ter dat Gawd-forsaken hole ter nurse youse bot' back ter healt'. Youse is a square guy; will youse say a good word fer me wit' de Old Man if I put youse wise ter de main squeeze in dat little game, de swell dat paid us ter keep youse out o' de way?"

"Can that," Odell responded laconically. "You don't know where to find him yourself or you wouldn't have been hanging around that street. Who told you to look there for him—Sims?"

"Youse is on." Tony drew back disconsolately in his corner. "I may do a stretch but dey'll go up wit' me, de two o' dem! Dis ain't de foist job I done fer dat guy, but Sims was always de go-between, an' I never laid eyes on

him till he showed up yes'day wit' Sims at de boathouse. Dat's Gawd's trut'."

"What other jobs have you done for him? Come clean, Tony. How do I know you didn't dope that whiskey to get away with Pete's roll and the rest that you were both to be paid?"

"Youse wouldn't frame me?" Tony's hoarse voice rose to a whine. "I kin prove dat Pete bought dat whiskey off a hick an' de laud'mun in a drug-store in de burg near where we was at. But I'll come clean, all right; if I'm goin' up, I'm goin' ter have comp'ny! De guy dat Sims works fer is a blackmailer, see? Gets somet'in' on rich kids an' makes 'em cough up. When dey puts up a kick Sims comes after me, an' I rocks 'em ter sleep an' sits beside de cradle till dey wakes up an' comes across. Dey t'inks it's just a hold-up an' kidnappin' job o' mine an' never gets wise dat de big guy is back o' it; but dey coughs up just de same an' never squeals fer fear de other bus'ness will come out; an' I divvy wid de main squeeze t'rough Sims."

"You made use of that boathouse before?"

"Nix. We never took none o' dem out o' de city, an' I t'ought it was bad dope ter do it wid youse, but we had our orders. We kept 'em in a loft over by de river; I kin take youse dere—"

"No. Here we are at Headquarters; you can tell the Old Man where it is." As he opened the door of the taxi Odell put a final question. "Why did you look for Sims or his employer up in Ninety-third Street?"

"'Cause I couldn't find Sims; an' I had ter get ter him right away an' tell him youse an' de other boid had flown an' Pete croaked. I went up ter dat place wid Sims more'n

once, an' I suspicioned it was maybe one o' de joints where de main guy hangs out when he's layin' low. I never lamped which bell Sims rung; but I t'ought I'd loaf around ter-day ter see if I could get a flash at one o' 'em." Tony shivered miserably as his captor piloted him up the broad stairs. "I've wised youse up to all I know, honest to Gawd!"

CHAPTER XX

THE TRYST

AT Headquarters after Tony was led away, Odell learned that although no trace had yet been discovered of the fugitive Farley Drew, his henchman Sims was safely under lock and key. He had been picked up an hour before at the Grand Central Station just as he started to board a train for the West, and so far had maintained a dogged silence as to the whereabouts of his erstwhile employer; but Captain Lewis expressed the opinion that a few hours of the gentle art of persuasion as practiced by his subordinates would overcome Sims's reticence.

The chief of the bureau had one item of interest to impart, however: the mysterious telephone call to the carpenter shop on the day before the portrait fell had been definitely traced to the Meade house.

Odell pondered on this latest bit of intelligence as he made his way to the office of *The Wall-Street Gazette*. If Lorne had not been at home between three and four o'clock on the previous Wednesday afternoon, a fact which could easily be established, then he must either have had a confederate in the house, or the theory which the detective had so carefully built up must inevitably fall to the ground.

Reaching the editorial rooms of the newspaper, Odell sent in a hastily scribbled card to the chief, and was ushered

immediately into a tiny cluttered office, where a lanky, sandy-haired individual untied his long legs from about the swivel chair and literally fell upon his visitor's neck.

"Barry Odell, you confounded old sleuth, where have you been keeping yourself? The fellows were all asking about you at the class reunion dinner in June, but all I could tell them was that you were too busy hunting crooks to think of the old days."

"I *have* been busy, Jim," Odell responded quietly; but a slight flush had mounted to his usually impassive brow. "How are all the fellows? I'd like to have seen them again."

"Then why the deuce didn't you show up? You got the announcement card, didn't you?" Jim Dilke pushed his guest into a chair and proffered a box of cigars, which he took from a drawer in the desk. "You needn't be afraid to try one; they're the kind I keep for our advertisers."

"Thanks." Odell accepted a cigar, lighted it, and settled back in his chair. "Yes, I got old Whip's announcement; but—well, I didn't graduate with the rest of you, you know, and our ways lie far apart now."

"It is you and your insufferable, stiff-necked pride that widened the path," Dilke declared with spirit. "I don't know why in thunder, when your old man died and you had to quit the university after the freshman year, you didn't stay on instead, and let some of us see you through. You could have paid it back."

Odell shook his head.

"I had to go to work then," he replied. "There were others to be taken care of, you may remember; and I don't

borrow.—Whipple is the head of his corporation now, isn't he? Pretty good for a chap at twenty-nine."

"Oh, well, you know how a fellow can climb in one of those mushroom Western towns." Dilke leaned forward in his chair. "He is here now; I'll call him up, and we three will go and have a little dinner to-night somewhere."

"Sorry, but I can't make it," Odell interrupted again. "The fact is, I'm on a case just now."

"I might have known it," Dilke exclaimed ruefully. "You've come to me for some dope, I suppose. What is it? Has some Wall-Street magnate murdered his mother-in-law?"

"Not quite that." Odell smiled. "I would like to know though, Jim, what a certain broker has been doing on the Exchange lately."

"Who? We've got 'em all stuffed, mounted, and catalogued," announced his friend. "The little old *Gazette* doesn't miss many tricks."

"The man"—Odell eyed the glowing tip of his cigar studiously—"is Richard Lorne."

"Lorne? Great Scott, you don't mean to say you're on *that* case?" Dilke's chair creaked perilously. "What does it mean; wholesale murder or a practical joke?"

"What do you know about it?" Odell demanded in his turn.

"Only what everybody knows who has two cents for a paper and can read," the other retorted. "Didn't you know yourself that it was all out in the early edition of the evening papers? Here, have a look."

He swept an armful of newspapers across the desk, and

after a glance or two at the staring headlines Odell laid them aside.

"I suppose the boys couldn't be kept off it much longer in any event," he commented. "I can't talk about it now, Jim, but there isn't any joke about it. I'd like to get a line on what Lorne has been doing to the market during the last two months."

"What the market has been doing to him, you mean." Dilke laughed. "It is a wonder he isn't wiped out; for he was caught short a month or so ago in that Mexamer Oil slump for a devil of a lot, and we expected him to go under pronto; but he managed somehow to tide himself over. He must have worked a miracle."

"He was in so deep, then?"

"Deep? He's been playing the wrong side of the market almost steadily for the past six months. Odd, too; he's a pretty shrewd operator as a rule, but roughly speaking, I should say he had lost nearly half a million since the first of the year." Dilke paused, blew a smoke-ring, and regarded his friend thoughtfully. "I suppose I musn't ask what his financial condition has to do with the fact that his wife's body is to be exhumed for an autopsy and strange things are hinted concerning the death of his son?"

"Of course you may, Jim." Odell laughed. "As a matter of fact, it has no direct bearing on the case; it is what we call the routine work, getting a line on the family finances and who controls them. You're too old a bird in the newspaper game yourself to take any stock in the innuendoes of the press when we won't give out any authentic dope to fill their columns. I know it seems piking

of me to show up only when I want your help; but one of these days I'll take a vacation and we'll have a little reunion of our own."

He rose and laid the stub of his cigar on the ash-tray.

"I'm only too glad to tell you anything I can, old man." Dilke held out his hand. "I'll fix you up a statement of Lorne's recorded stock deals for the past few months, if you like. I can get it to your rooms late to-night or to-morrow morning."

"I wish you would," Odell responded as they shook hands. "I can slip it into my report for my chief and save a lot of time. So long, Jim."

Leaving his friend, he made his way to the office of another newspaper farther uptown, a big metropolitan daily, where he spent more than an hour going over the files of two years before. He came at last upon that for which he had been seeking—a reproduction of a photograph—and he whistled softly as he studied it. One phase of the problem which had been an enigma from the first was now made clear.

Dining early, he returned to Headquarters for an hour's chat with Captain Lewis, but found that there had been no further developments since his previous visit. Sims still refused to talk, and the earth seemed to have opened and swallowed Farley Drew.

Miller, whose day of rest appeared to have obliterated all trace of the hours of torture when he lay bound and gagged in the launch beneath the boathouse, had reported for duty; and after telephoning to Smith, Odell set out once more for the Meade house in company with the operative.

Blake and Shaw had been relieved at their post outside by two other plainclothesmen; and Odell stopped to give them a word of instruction, when Miller suddenly touched his arm.

The tradesmen's entrance—a door in the high brick wall of the yard, which opened from the side street—had swung in cautiously, and as Odell drew his men quickly around the screening corner of the house a muffled female figure appeared, heavily veiled and swathed in a cumbersome cloak despite the warmth of the September night. It appeared to hesitate for a moment, then turned and struck off down the side street to the eastward; while from the door of the yard a second figure, that of a man, emerged and followed stealthily.

"Smith is on the job," Odell commented in a low tone. "That means Miss Cissie has started out to keep her appointment. Come on, Miller."

In spite of her bulky attire the woman ahead walked with a lithe grace, and she appeared to be in no uncertainty as to her route. The trail led east to Park Avenue, north for several blocks, then west to Fifth Avenue, where at the corner she jumped into a taxi, which moved off without waiting for any instructions.

No other disengaged motor was in sight; but just as Odell and Miller overtook Smith, who had momentarily hesitated, an ancient hansom cab drawn by a spavined horse drew up at the curb, and a husky voice addressed them.

The three piled into the cab and a few words from Odell sent them off in full pursuit of the taxi, whose tail light was fast disappearing to the north. Then began a long and tortuous chase which winded the horse before a half-mile

had been covered. Fortunately, at this crisis an empty touring car made its appearance; it was evidently a private machine, but the chauffeur was not unwilling to make a bargain, and the detective and his operatives were again upon their way.

Through side streets they wove as on a shuttle, shooting around corners, circling and doubling on their tracks until the city had been traversed from river to river; but ever the trail led northward. The park was passed, and the cheaper shopping district of what had once been known as Harlem. Vacant lots appeared with increasing frequency between the solid rows of towering apartment houses; and at last they came to the anomalous region where the farthest tentacles of the city reached, and brick and stone gave way to frame cottages, for the most part in the final stages of dilapidation.

"Why would Drew—if it's he she's come to meet—ask her to trail away out here?" Smith muttered. "Why didn't he meet her where they could lose themselves in a crowd?"

"Because in that crowd there would probably be one of our boys looking for him," Odell replied succinctly. "He must know by now of Sims's arrest and that we're after him with the whole Force back of us. What happened between the time I 'phoned you and Miss Cissie's getaway?"

"Nothing. She came down to dinner all flushed up, and her eyelids were puffed as though she'd been crying; but I hadn't heard a sound from her room all the afternoon. At the table she complained in a low tone—for my benefit outside of course—of feeling ill, and said she would go to bed at once. I don't believe she ate very much, for I could hear her aunt urging her to try just a little soup. She went

right back to her room, and after you 'phoned I went to the upper hall. Her light was going, but there wasn't a sound until she suddenly opened her door. I had just time to get behind the curtains of that bay window when she looked carefully about and then closed the door again. She repeated that performance three times; and finally I guess she was sure I had quit for the night, for she sneaked out and down the back stairs to the yard. I was right on her heels, as you saw; but I don't think she knew it."

"She's not running any chances, though, that she can avoid.—Look! Her taxi is stopping in front of that little cottage with the vines all over it." Odell bent forward and touched the chauffeur's shoulder. "Shoot past and on for a couple of blocks and then through to the next street. I think the grounds reach all the way back. We'll make a racket as though we were out on a joyride."

The two operatives took their cue; and they whirled by to a chorus of cheerful yowls and snatches of song. Through a bumpy, unpaved side road they plowed their way, turning down once more on the back street, in silence now, with the engine barely humming.

"Here's the place," Odell announced. "Pull up and wait by that open lot there, where the empty roadster is stalled. Will you take a chance on putting out your own lights?"

"Surest thing you know!" the chauffeur responded with alacrity. "If there's liable to be any rough work and you want me, why, that's my middle name."

Odell thanked him, and with Miller and Smith at his heels pushed through the rank undergrowth of the neglected yard until they came to a narrow path which led to the back door of the vine-covered cottage. Save for a low light

which streamed from a broken-shuttered window at one side, the place was dark and seemingly deserted, and the taxi in which Cissie Chalmers had come was nowhere to be seen.

"Slip around under that lighted window and listen, Miller. It is too high from the ground for you to see in, but you may hear something," Odell commanded.

"Say, this door's unfastened," Smith announced in a sepulchral whisper as the other operative slipped away in the darkness.

"If Drew is in there he evidently doesn't anticipate a flank attack," Odell returned. "He's planned for a rear getaway in case of trouble. Remember that little roadster in front of the open lot?"

"Sure; but what's his game with the girl? If he knows we've got Sims his only chance is to get clean away; and he wouldn't want to be hampered with a petticoat."

"He knows that no third degree in the world will make Sims talk; and remember he still thinks Miller and I are up in that boathouse guarded by Tony and Pete. In his estimation all we've got on him is that attempt to blackmail Gene; and he will be safe from prosecution if he marries into the family, don't you see?" Odell explained hurriedly; adding as Miller reappeared around the corner, "Well? Did you hear anything?"

"It's an elopement," Miller declared. "There's a fellow and a girl in there, but no one else, I don't think. They're arguing, him for a justice of the peace and her for a minister; but it looks like he's winning out."

"All right; we'll waste no more time," Odell observed grimly. "Smith, go 'round to the front door; have your gun handy. Knock and stamp as loud as you can, and de-

mand admittance in the name of the law. They won't bother you; but stay there until I whistle; then come back and lend a hand."

Smith disappeared in his turn around the corner of the house; and in another moment the silence was broken by the tramp and scuffle as of many feet, a resounding clatter of fists on wood, and a bellowed command.

Odell drew his pistol and a pocket electric flash, and motioning Miller to one side of the kitchen door, took up his position at the other. The light in the side window had been suddenly extinguished; and now above the clamor from the front of the house Odell caught the sound of stumbling footsteps within, and once a woman's frightened, convulsive sob.

The kitchen door swung inward, and a man's figure appeared supporting that of a woman who clung to him desperately. As he stepped down from the rickety porch a piercing shaft of light glared into his face, and Odell's voice commanded:

"Up with your hands, Farley Drew!"

"You!" Drew emitted a string of oaths; but he thrust the girl roughly from him and retreated a step or two, slowly elevating his hands in the air. His debonair insouciance was gone, and in the glare of the electric torch his face showed a distorted mask of evil passions.

"You thought Miller and I were safely under guard at that boathouse, didn't you?" Odell paused to blow a blast upon his whistle. "It didn't occur to you that it might be burned to the waterline; that Pete was dead and Tony at Headquarters telling all he knows.—Oh, *would* you!"

For with the realization of what this intelligence meant

Drew had suddenly lowered his hands and rushed for his antagonist. Cissie Chalmers was struggling like a little wildcat in Miller's embrace; but Smith came dashing around the corner of the house just as with a mighty crashing of the undergrowth their chauffeur bounded with a joyous whoop into the fray.

Drew fought with the strength and ferocity of despair; but he would have been no match for Odell alone, and the struggle was a short-lived one. Handcuffed and snarling curses, he was dragged to where the two cars waited in the roadway.

"Miller, you can drive that roadster, can't you?" Odell asked. "Smith can stand on the running-board and see that your passenger behaves himself; for I'm going to give you two the job of taking Drew to Headquarters. I'll escort Miss Chalmers home."

Cissie gave a sharp cry of despair as the roadster glided off, then drew herself up and, disdaining Odell's hand, stepped into the tonneau of the touring car and seated herself. He got in beside her, and the chauffeur took his place behind the wheel. When he received the address he emitted a low whistle.

"Great Cæsar! The murder house!" he exclaimed. "Say, did that guy—"

"Oh, it is a lie!—A lie!" The indignant cry was wrung from Cissie, but she instantly recovered herself and uttered no further word until the Meade house was reached.

There Odell detained her with a firm hand upon her arm until he had settled with the obliging chauffeur; then he accompanied her up the steps and rang the bell.

The door was opened almost immediately, but not by

Peters. Gerda stood there, and her eyes sought Cissie's face with a look of stern questioning; but the girl wrenched her arm from Odell's grasp and with a sob rushed past the maid and up the stairs.

Odell closed the front door behind him and faced Gerda beneath the brilliant hall light. The woman raised her eyes steadily to meet his, but something she read there made her catch her breath sharply.

When he spoke it was with gentle gravity.

"I want a word with you, Mrs. Gael."

CHAPTER XXI

THE THIRD GENERATION

"YOU know, then?" The woman who had been called "Gerda" placed both thin hands to her breast and bowed her head. "I do not know how you discovered the truth, but it doesn't matter now; the purpose for my presence here has been taken out of my hands."

"The family have all retired?" Odell drew her toward the library. "Sit down here, please; I shall not detain you long. Mrs. Gael, I think I know your motive for masquerading here, but I should like to hear it confirmed by your own lips. It was in order that you might be revenged in some way upon Farley Drew, was it not?"

Again she bowed her head.

"Do you know all that this man has done to me? For my own folly and unfaithfulness to my husband, I blame no one but myself; and I have paid for it in the loss of all that makes life worth living. He had promised me that if I were divorced he would make me his wife, and I believed him; later he refused to keep that promise, and he was my only refuge, my one hope of even a partial rehabilitation in the estimation of my world." She lifted her tragic eyes and rested them upon the detective's face. "I admit that I was desperate, that I pleaded with him, followed him, lost all sense of pride in my terror of a future

without him; and—he had made other plans in which I would have no part. I was a menace to those plans, a menace to his whole future career; and he conspired with a crooked physician to railroad me to an insane asylum. I was never an attendant in one as I told you, Sergeant Odell, but an inmate—I, who was as absolutely sane as you see me now!"

"You escaped?"

"After three months of purgatory! With the help of an old servant who was faithful to me I concealed myself until I had learned Farley Drew's plans; and then I came here to frustrate them. I meant to wait until his hour of complete triumph, and then expose him—not alone in regard to his treatment of me, but other things which I had learned concerning him, criminal things. I felt no compunction in regard to Cissie Chalmers. My revenge on him would save her from wrecking her future; and she is not the type who can suffer very deeply."

"Did anyone in this house suspect your identity?" Odell asked.

"Only Rannie; and he also hated Farley Drew. He told me only yesterday that he would not give me away because he wanted to see what he called the fun." She shivered. "There is something inhuman about that boy."

"Was it he whose eyes you advised me to watch, Mrs. Gael?" He shot the question suddenly at her; but she merely shook her head in a noncommittal fashion.

"I cannot speak of that again, Sergeant Odell. No power can make me; for, as I told you, I have no proof, and even you would think me truly insane if I dared to voice my suspicions. I swear that I have had nothing to do with

what has been going on in this house; that I actually know nothing; and my testimony would be valueless, besides leaving me open to the danger of being sent back to that awful place." She wrung her hands. "I will kill myself before they take me again!"

Odell saw that in the face of the morbid fear which obsessed her no argument of his would avail; but he did not yet despair of winning her confidence. Abruptly he switched the topic back to its original trend.

"Why do you say that your purpose has been taken out of your hands?"

She smiled faintly.

"You have anticipated me, have you not? One look at Cissie Chalmers's face just now told me that the net must have closed about Farley Drew without any help from me; and my masquerade here is at an end." She rose and held out her hands appealingly. "You will not subject me to further humiliation? I have hurt no one in this family by my presence here. I have performed my ostensible duties as faithfully as any real servant could have done. Let me go quietly before morning; and keep my secret. Further notoriety and shame will kill me; and I swear that I have done no harm! Please, Sergeant Odell, instruct your men to let me go in peace; and I will return to the home of my old servant and not leave it until you tell me that I may. I will give you the address, and you can have one of your men follow me if you don't believe me; but for Heaven's sake let me leave this house of hideous memories!"

"But, Mrs. Gael, what is it that you know of Farley Drew? You spoke of criminal things. Have you always been aware of them?"

"No. In my blind infatuation I thought of him as a veritable god; but later, after my husband divorced me and Farley Drew began to show himself in his true colors, I learned that he depended for a livelihood upon fleecing and blackmailing young men whose weaknesses for vice he had encouraged. Then once I overheard a conversation between him and his valet which revealed to me that he was actually in league with recognized criminals. Even that did not kill the last spark of my love for him, and I was still determined that his moral obligation to me should be paid. No matter how sullied his name was, I demanded that he give it to me; for he had dragged my own in the dust." She paused and then asked: "What I have told you is no news, is it? You know of the swindles and blackmail?"

"Yes, Mrs. Gael. Farley Drew has just been taken into custody; and one at least of his accomplices has confessed."

"And that poor little fool upstairs ran away to-night to go to him? I should not have waited so long; I should have told you before." She raised her eyes once more supplicatingly to his. "Oh, Sergeant Odell, you will let me go? I could not bear the reproach in her eyes if she knew the truth, even though I am not responsible for her infatuation."

"Yes," agreed Odell after a moment's reflection. "You may go, Mrs. Gael; but I want you to think well over the stand you have taken in regard to withholding the help you are in a position to give me. Remember, if another death occurs in this family you may be indirectly responsible."

"I—I cannot help that," she cried; and the hunted expression came once more into her face. "These people are nothing to me; and what little I could tell you would

be too utterly preposterous and incredible for you to believe that it was not the figment of a crazed brain. You do not know what I endured in those fearful three months; I dare not face a possibility of the repetition of such suffering. I will leave the house at once, within the hour; and I cannot thank you enough. If—if you should suspect what I believe to be the truth, come to me; prove that you have the same person in mind, and I will tell you the idea which I have formed."

With that Odell was forced for the time being to be content; and accepting the address of her servant, he saw her depart with one of the plainsclothesmen who were on duty outside in tow.

He had had a long day after the sleepless night and the effects of the blow which Tony had dealt him, and he plodded wearily homeward in an unaccustomed state of mental depression. Much had been accomplished in the last few hours; but it had been of a purely negative nature, save only that portion of the investigation which had related to Richard Lorne; and his possible guilt was still merely a matter of the wildest speculation. Granted the existence of a conceivable motive, there still remained vast difficulties in the way of fastening the series of revolting crimes upon him; and not the least of them in the detective's mind was the hint of insanity which Mrs. Gael had attempted to convey to him.

In his own modest rooms once more, he slept the sleep of utter exhaustion, and awakened to the discordant jangle of the telephone bell trying to vie with those of a nearby church. Sunday morning! Four days had elapsed since he was first called in upon the mystery of the Meade house,

and he was no nearer its solution than when he had been summoned.

He dragged himself out of bed and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Is that you, Barry? This is Jim Dilke speaking. I'm sending you around by messenger a report on that matter we were discussing yesterday."

"Yes?" The haze of sleep cleared like magic from Odell's brain. "Did you find any dope on how that party managed to recoup his losses and keep his head above water?"

"Surest thing you know. He's been working through a dummy company and simply cleaned up in the past three weeks; got back all he lost in the last year and then some. I had him doped all wrong." Dilke's cheerful, brisk tones fell leadenly on the detective's ears. "He had nerve, all right; took the remainder of his holdings, got on the right side of the market at last, and tripled his capital the first day. Since then there has been no holding him. He has been speculating a little on the side under his own name to keep his connection with the new company under cover—perfectly legitimate, you know—and lost consistently, but not enough to even make a dent in what he has rolled up through the dummy concern. There is a certain clique of big men who have been out after him for a year or more, since he broke up a corner they were engineering; but when they get on to this new move of his they are going to be a pretty sick bunch."

"Thanks, old man." Odell tried to make his voice cordial. "It was mighty good of you to take all this trouble."

"No trouble; the messenger's on the way. Don't forget that little reunion we are going to have as soon as you get a breathing-spell. So long."

The receiver clicked, and Odell sat down on the side of his bed. The motive which he had so carefully built up had dissipated into thin air; and despite the suspicions expressed by Miss Risby, the detective felt that he was back once more at the starting-point of his investigation. The fact of the two murders had been proved to his own satisfaction at least, and the evidence of the two other attempted ones was incontrovertible; but of the identity of the slayer no slightest trace had been gained, save that he must be a person of extraordinary physical strength, great ingenuity, and a capacity for carelessness in each case which savored of insane recklessness.

Insane! Why had that word formed itself in his mind? Had the conversation of the previous night with the woman who had first warned him made a still more profound impression upon his subconsciousness than he had been aware of? If this series of crimes were indeed the work of one with an unsound mind no motive need be looked for. Could the seemingly astute but erratic speculator be guilty after all of the death of his wife and her son?

The report arrived while he was dressing, and a cursory glance through it sufficed to convince the detective that his friend had stated the situation correctly. The new company had been phenomenally successful since its incorporation; and Lorne's speculations of the past few weeks had evidently netted him no mean fortune.

Breakfasting at a small restaurant near his rooms, Odell went immediately to the Meade house, where he encountered

the attorney Samuel Titheredge in the hall in earnest consultation with Doctor Adams.

"Nothing to be concerned about," the latter was saying. "She has evidently been crying most of the night, even if she does deny it; that accounts for her swollen eyes and flushed face; and as for the nausea and pain—well, it would be a frightful insult to her dignity if I were to suggest that she was suffering from a plain, old-fashioned stomachache! Anyone who stuffs candy and sweets as Cissie does is bound to be upset once in a while."

He greeted the detective cordially, and with a reference to the autopsy on the following day he took his leave.

"Is Miss Cissie ill?" asked Odell.

"She seems to be a bit out of sorts, and Mr. Lorne insisted that the doctor look her over," Titheredge responded. "After the events of the past month he is naturally alarmed at the slightest trouble in the household; but Adams says she is all right. How is the case coming on, Sergeant?"

"We've made some progress, but I can't talk about it, sir; rules of the Department, you know." Odell repeated the time-worn professional prevarication almost mechanically. A sentence or two which Smith had uttered in his report of the previous night had returned suddenly to his mind.—"Miss Cissie had come down to dinner all flushed up and her eyelids were puffed. . . . At the table she complained of feeling ill. . . . I don't believe she ate very much, for I could hear her aunt urging her to try just a little soup."

What if Doctor Adams had made a second mistake, and the human fiend at work in this house had selected another victim? The next instant, however, he put the thought from him with an inward smile at his own apprehension.

The affair must be getting on his nerves as well as those of the family!

"We owe you a debt of gratitude aside from the case." The attorney smiled. "Gene came down to me yesterday and made a clean breast of his association with Farley Drew and what it led him into; and he said you sent him. He is going to make full reparation from his estate; and his stepfather and I have consented to keep the whole matter a secret. They cannot either of them be thankful enough to you."

"At least they may be sure of one thing: Farley Drew will never trouble anyone in this household again; and Miss Cissie has had a very lucky escape, as she will learn shortly." Odell hesitated and then added deliberately: "Mr. Titheredge, may I have a word with you in the strictest professional confidence?"

The attorney darted a keen glance at him.

"Certainly, Sergeant. Come right into the drawing-room. Nan and Gene are with Mr. Lorne, and Miss Meade with Cissie. I suppose you know that there has been another disappearance among the servants? Gerda is gone."

"I know." Odell nodded. "Mr. Titheredge, I am going to ask you this under the seal of professional secrecy; and I must request that you tell me the absolute truth, for much may depend on it. Have you ever heard a suggestion of insanity connected in any way with the family?"

"Good heavens!" The attorney started back and sank into a chair. "This is preposterous, Sergeant; absurd! You surely cannot have conceived the idea—"

"You have not answered my question, Mr. Titheredge." Odell smiled. "Of course, if you prefer not to do so I can

obtain the information elsewhere; but I should not at this stage of the game care to have the press get hold of the fact that such inquiries were being instituted."

"I should hope not!" Titheredge exclaimed fervently. "You horrify me! I don't know why you should have entertained such a thought, nor who could have suggested it to you; but I can assure you most solemnly that no insanity has manifested itself in the family in this or the last generation."

"But before that?" Odell had sensed the mental reservation. "In what branch of the family was there insanity, Mr. Titheredge?"

"You haven't heard, then, about old Joshua P. Meade?" The attorney had lowered his tones, and he glanced over his shoulder as if fearful of an eavesdropper. "He was the father of Mrs. Lorne and Miss Effie, you know; the children's grandfather. They have never been told, although their mother and aunt knew; and the secret was carefully kept from the world. The old gentleman was always considered eccentric, and possessed of an ungovernable temper; and in his later years it was given out that he had suffered a stroke and become a chronic invalid. He was kept in strict seclusion, and in that seclusion he finally died."

"He had lost his mind?"

"Yes. Not gradually; nor could age nor any mental strain account for it. He became suddenly violent, a raving maniac in fact, and was kept in a room up on the top floor here for seven years. Every effort was made to effect a cure, and the best specialists and alienists were consulted; but with no result. However, he has been dead these many years, and, thank God, no trace of his terrible malady has

asserted itself in either the second or the third generation."

"I have been told that Mrs. Lorne possessed an almost maniacal temper," Odell observed. "I am quoting the exact words used. One or two of her children have inherited it from her to a certain extent, have they not?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" the attorney responded testily. "They are merely high-spirited, like their mother; and she was an exceptionally brilliant woman. I was reluctant to mention the old gentleman to you or discuss the matter in any way, Sergeant, for I feared you might fly off at this tangent. Old Mr. Meade's malady was not of the sort which is transmitted."

"Just what form did his mania take, Mr. Titheredge?"

"It was intermittent. For weeks he would be as seemingly sane as anyone and even played a remarkably good game of chess; I spent many an evening with him. Then wholly without warning he would become violent, and physical restraint would be necessary to prevent his doing harm to himself and others. Remember, however, that this trouble did not come upon him until late in life, many years after his children were born. If you try, Sergeant, to account for this terrible sequence of events by any inherited taint in the family, you will not only be wasting your time but fostering a totally unjust suspicion upon these innocent children. I can assure you that no curse has descended upon the third generation in this case."

Titheredge rose with an air of finality, and the detective walked with him to the door.

"Doubtless you are right, Mr. Titheredge; but in an affair of this sort where there seems to be no possible motive, no

sane purpose, we must consider every contingency, no matter how remote."

Closing the front door after the attorney, he started thoughtfully for the stairs, when a young man who had been standing in the shadow of the library doorway stepped forward.

"Sergeant Odell, I hope you will forgive my flare-up yesterday; but I was very anxious about Miss Chalmers's safety. Have you discovered anything yet?"

"Several things, Mr. Traymore." Odell regarded the young man pleasantly. "Your anxiety was natural, and under the circumstances your suggestion was not ill-timed. Miss Chalmers is in no danger; but I think it would be a relief to her stepfather's mind if she were to go away until this investigation is over. Did I understand you to say that your mother wished her to come for a little visit?"

The boy's face flushed and then paled.

"My God!" he whispered. "Then there *is* danger. I knew it, I felt it. My mother will be more than glad to receive her and take care of her as long as she can stay, Sergeant; I'll run back and tell her at once and return for Nan. For God's sake see that no harm comes to her."

"None shall, my boy," the detective responded. "Nor will it be necessary for your mother to extend her hospitality for very long; for I think the end of the case is in sight."

CHAPTER XXII

THE FINAL CLUE

FOR the rest of the day Odell pondered over the reluctant admission which he had dragged from the attorney and its possible significance in relation to the hint which Mrs. Gael had given him; but although he studied the members of the family with whom he came in contact he could read nothing in their expressions or speech which pointed to the slightest irrationality.

Mrs. Traymore herself arrived with her son to take Nan home with her, and after some urging the young girl consented to go. Cissie remained in her room with her aunt in constant attendance upon her; so that Odell had opportunity for only a brief talk with the older woman, but short as it was it temporarily quieted his uneasiness.

Miss Meade's face was drawn with fatigue, but her eyes shone as she told him that Cissie had confided to her the end of her sorry romance and thanked him for their deliverance from Drew's pernicious influence. As for Cissie's indisposition, she had often suffered in the same way after too great an indulgence in sweets, and would doubtless be quite recovered on the morrow.

Rannie had locked himself in his room and was unapproachable; but before he departed for the night Odell had

a long talk with Gene and his stepfather, which removed his last lingering doubts as to the latter's complete innocence.

He retired no wiser than on the previous night; but with the morning a fresh decision had come, and he was back at the Meade house before the family had breakfasted.

Cissie was no better. He learned that she had passed a very bad night and her suffering and nausea had increased. With a very grave face the detective went to Rannie's door and knocked authoritatively. This time the familiar, querulous voice bade him enter; and he found the boy curled up upon the couch with a book, which he hastily thrust under the pillows at Odell's appearance.

"So you spoiled Gerda's little game." Rannie smiled his twisted smile. "I'm curious to know how you found out who she was."

"That was not difficult," the detective responded with an answering smile. "She told me at my first interview with her that she had been in a certain rather unusual place at a certain time; and when I learned that Mrs. Gael had been there also I put two and two together. I don't think you will see her or Farley Drew again. Have you had another bad turn?"

Rannie stiffened against the sympathy in the friendly voice.

"Nothing unusual," he replied in a surly tone. "I only want to be let alone."

"I'm sorry. I won't stay long, my boy; but I want you to help me." Odell drew up a chair beside the couch and seated himself. "I don't know how good a toxicologist you are as well as a bacteriologist, but I fancy you have our friend Doctor Adams beaten a mile."

"Oh, Adams is a pettifogging old ass," the boy returned carelessly. Then his eyes narrowed. "What's the game?"

"Just this." The detective leaned forward suddenly until his eyes were almost on a level with the dark, sardonic ones upturned morosely to him. "Suppose that I knew no more about poisons than—well, than I could learn from glancing through these books of yours at odd times or asking casual questions of some family practitioner. What poison would it be easiest for me to obtain without comment in any drugstore?"

The boy shrugged.

"Carbolic, or any of the acids for eradicating spots or verdigris, I suppose. They'd be pretty average deadly; but none of them would have worked, if you are still harping on my mother's case."

"I don't mean anything of that sort," Odell explained. "I have in mind some poison which would work gradually and be practically tasteless; something which could be given in the victim's food, perhaps, and produce symptoms which might easily be mistaken for those resulting from some trivial indisposition."

Rannie's eyes widened and their morose stare gave place to one of grudging admiration.

"So you're on that tack, are you?" he asked. "I was only waiting till I was sure before springing it on you myself. This is an old house, you know; there are plenty of mice and rats in the walls, and there is a certain white powder which exterminates them quicker than anything else, and which would be sold without question for that purpose in any drugstore if one's appearance and manner didn't

arouse suspicion. It is funny, but I was reading up about it when you came in."

He reached under the cushions and drew forth the book, which he opened at a certain page and handed without further remark to the detective.

"Arsenic!" Odell read. "Tri-oxide, eh? 'The crude oxide yields a white, crystalline powder, odorless but with a faint, metallic, sweetish taste. Small quantities produce poisoning.'—Humph! I wonder how small a quantity would produce a noticeable effect in, say, a few days, and what that effect would be."

Rannie reached out his hand for the book, closed it, and placed it once more beneath the cushions.

"Three-quarters of a grain—a mere pinch on the end of a knife—if given twice a day would have a very decided effect in less than a week," he said slowly. "I told you once that I would not take the trouble to put any of my precious family out of the way; but I didn't mean that I wouldn't lift a finger to stop someone else from killing even the most disagreeable of them. The symptoms, Sergeant, are flushing, puffed eyelids, pain, and nausea."

Odell started from his chair.

"How long have you known this?" he demanded.

"I suspected yesterday; I had only convinced myself when you came."

"And the antidote? Quick! Tell me the antidote!"

"An emetic, anything that will remove it from the system. However, that won't prevent the next dose from being administered." Rannie had dragged himself to his feet. "Bring Cissie in here, if you like. I'll see that no one gets to her, and I guess Dad and I are off your list of suspects

this time; we haven't either of us left our rooms since Saturday. It rather looks as though our family nemesis were working overtime, doesn't it?"

"Don't mention this to anyone else," Odell cautioned as he started hastily for the door. "It may be the very means of trapping the person we are after."

He passed out into the hall but paused for a moment, lost in thought. If Cissie was indeed being slowly poisoned, and the would-be murderer suspected that his secret was known, he would instantly cease his efforts, and the opportunity of proving his guilt would be irretrievably lost. Yet the girl must be protected and an antidote given to relieve her suffering. It might even be that one more dose would prove fatal! Dare he attempt dissimulation when her very life was perhaps in danger?

He advanced slowly to her closed door, and even as he paused before it with his hand uplifted to knock he heard her faint groans and Miss Meade's soothing voice in response. Another sound reached his ears also, the soft pad of feet up the back stairs; and he turned to find Peters coming toward him with a tray upon which a cup of broth steamed invitingly.

With instant decision the detective advanced and held out his hand.

"That's for Miss Chalmers, isn't it, Peters?" he asked carelessly. "I'm just going to ask Miss Meade if she can spare a minute, and I'll hand it in to her myself."

He watched the butler narrowly, but Peters relinquished the tray without a moment's hesitation, and turning went downstairs again at his usual dignified gait.

Odell waited until he heard him descend the second flight

to the kitchen, then put the tray down hastily on a chair near Rannie's door, and raised the cup to his lips. It contained beef tea undoubtedly, but beef tea with a sweetish, metallic taste; and the detective replaced the cup and softly opened Rannie's door.

"Have you a bottle or some small receptacle that is perfectly clean and sterilized?" he demanded in hushed tones.

"Several in the medicine-chest.—Here, wait a minute." Rannie made his way slowly and painfully to the bathroom, and returned with a tiny vial in his hand. "What is it? You haven't got hold of some of the stuff already, have you?"

Without waiting to reply Odell dashed back, and filling the vial with the beef tea, he deliberately overturned the cup. Then he dashed down the front stairs and out the entrance door, beckoning to the ubiquitous Blake, who was still upon his post at the corner.

"Take this as quickly as you can up to Villard's laboratory; tell him to put aside everything else and analyze it at once. Say that I suggested the surest test he knows of for arsenic and wait for his report."

As the operative pocketed the vial and started down the steps he almost collided with Doctor Adams, who greeted Odell with a certain decorous triumph in his tones.

"I have just come from the autopsy on the body of Mrs. Lorne," he announced. "It revealed nothing but what we anticipated; pyemic focci in the kidneys and liver. You see, my dear Sergeant Odell, it was a clear case of septicemia, after all."

"Doctor Adams," the detective brushed the statement

aside as of small moment, "yesterday you diagnosed Miss Chalmers's case as ordinary stomachache, I believe; instead she is suffering from what is thought to be arsenical poisoning, given with criminal intent. Her life and your professional reputation are at stake—"

"Impossible!" the physician gasped. "Who would attempt such a dastardly—"

"The same person who has already murdered two of her family and tried to kill two more," Odell interrupted. "Think for yourself, Doctor. What are the symptoms of white-arsenic poisoning? Do they differ in any way from those Miss Chalmers exhibited yesterday?"

"This—this is frightful!" The physician put a shaking hand to his head. "If this is true my reputation is indeed at stake; but I never thought, I never dreamed of further foul play. Who is it, Sergeant? Who is keeping up these fearful attacks upon the family?"

"I mean to find that out before another day passes, Doctor, and I count upon your help," Odell replied earnestly. "I must ask you to follow my directions absolutely or you will be refused admittance to the house."

"Sir!" Doctor Adams drew himself up indignantly. "The young lady has been my patient since her birth—"

"And she would have been murdered before your eyes, as her mother was, if I had not interfered," retorted Odell sternly. "I am willing to protect you in this matter and give you the credit of discovering her true condition, if you obey my instructions; if not, a police doctor will take your place, and your diagnosis of yesterday will be given the publicity it deserves."

Doctor Adams leaned suddenly back against the vestibule wall, and his face whitened.

"I am quite willing to assist the authorities in every possible way, but I must be assured that the diagnosis which has been made in contradiction to my own is the correct one," he asserted with an assumption of dignity. "Of course, in any event an emetic will do no harm—"

"Everything must be done to relieve her at once, but I desire above all else that no one in the household be allowed to suspect that we have discovered the truth; no one at all, Doctor, not even her aunt or her stepfather; for they might innocently enough mention it in the hearing of the guilty person." Odell spoke rapidly in an undertone. "You will be informed as soon as you enter the house that Miss Chalmers is no better, and you will naturally proceed at once to her bedside. I want you to pretend that you have in no way changed your opinion of yesterday; and whatever measures you take to relieve her suffering must seem to be in the line of treatment you would ordinarily prescribe for the case you believed it to be originally."

"That should not be difficult to arrange," the physician murmured. "Should your suspicions be unfounded after all, Sergeant, the treatment will only cause temporary discomfort to my patient."

Odell could have throttled the pedantic little man for his tenacious obstinacy, but he continued patiently to elucidate his plan.

"After you have concluded your treatment I wish you to make some excuse to remain with your patient for the rest of the day if need be; at any rate until I require your

presence no longer. Do not leave her bedside nor permit anyone to approach her on any pretext, and see that nothing but your medicine passes her lips." He paused as a quick thought came to him. "Would it be possible to give her some powerful opiate which could not harm her and yet would throw her into an immediate and profound sleep which might be depended upon to last at least for some hours?"

"It would, of course," the physician assented.

"I hope you will administer it then as soon as you can make some pretext to be absolutely alone with her. That will preclude in a plausible manner any suggestion of nourishment for her until I have had time to perfect my plan.—Come now, please, Doctor. I will slip in first and close the door. After I have had time to get upstairs, ring and ask whoever admits you how Miss Chalmers is."

Odell suited the action to the word, and from the seclusion of Rannie's half-closed door had the satisfaction of seeing the doctor enter Cissie Chalmers's room.

He had noticed as he passed the hall chair that the tray was gone, and now he turned questioningly to Rannie.

"Aunt Effie came out looking for Peters with the broth, and I didn't think you wanted even her to know what you had discovered just yet, so I told her that I had heard you out in the hall and gone out to speak to you just as you stood there with the tray in your hand; said I had spoken so suddenly that you had upset the cup," the boy explained with his twisted grin. "It would be kind of a fierce thing for her to realize that she had probably been feeding Cissie poison with her own hands, wouldn't it? Aunt Effie's the squeamish sort; can't bear to see anybody hurt. They say

she nearly went crazy when she dropped me and found that my back would never be straight again; she's nearly smothered me with devotion ever since.—Did you tip off old Adams?"

"He's following my instructions now," Odell replied, wondering as he did so why he was giving this strange boy such complete confidence. If Rannie could in some way have slipped off downstairs and unseen dropped the poison into that cup before the broth was placed in it, his audacity and queer, warped sense of humor would have found rare sport in hoodwinking the man who had set himself to solve the problem.

Rannie chuckled.

"I'd like to have seen his face when he found out what was going on," he exclaimed. "Have you any idea yet as to who is doing this thing, Sergeant? I don't believe Cissie is in any more danger now that you have discovered what ails her; but Aunt Effie, Nan, and I are the only ones left of the family who have not received the attentions of our enemy, and I am curious to know where the lightning will strike next."

"We will soon see," Odell said. "There is your aunt going downstairs now; I want to speak to her."

But Miss Meade had already reached the ground floor and was starting toward the pantry as he descended the stairs, and Odell decided to wait for her return. He seated himself on the settle in the hall and gave himself up to the contemplation of the fresh problem which confronted him. Miss Meade herself and Richard Lorne were as obviously beyond question as was the supposition that Cissie was poisoning herself. Nan was away and Gerda had gone.

Of the household there remained only Rannie and Gene, Peters, the cook, and the housemaid. Could it be that he had taken the servants too much for granted, and that among them the guilty person might be found?

Miss Meade did not return; and for the better part of an hour he sat there deep in thought, when all at once the bell rang. Recognizing Blake's silhouette through the frosted glass, he opened the door himself and ushered the operative quickly into the library.

"What did Villard say?" he demanded without preamble.

"You had that sample doped out right, Sergeant." Blake grinned. "Villard told me to tell you that he used the Marsh test, and I watched him; I know a little about chemistry myself. He treated that stuff you gave me in the bottle with dilute sulphuric acid and metallic zinc in the gas generator and when the arsine formed he passed it through a glass tube and heated it. The metallic arsenic showed up all right and formed a mirror near the open end of the tube. There wasn't the chance of a mistake."

"Very good, Blake. Go and get your lunch and then relieve Shaw. I'll give you further instructions later."

He let the operative out quietly and started to ascend to the second floor, meaning to summon the doctor for a moment from the sickroom and acquaint him with what he had just learned, but paused. Someone was going up the second flight of stairs to the third floor; and a certain stealthy, catlike quality in the creeping footsteps made him halt and listen. Could it be Peters, and if so, what was he doing up there when he should have been making his preparations for lunch?

Whoever it was, the objective was evidently the servants'

quarters; for the steps did not halt outside Gene's door but kept on, and on an impulse Odell followed.

Up yet another flight and past the servants' rooms the tread continued softly but steadily to the last staircase, which led to the very top of the house; and all at once there returned to the detective's mind the story which Peters had told at Headquarters of the figure which had passed his door at the hour of Mrs. Lorne's death and the voice which had sounded from somewhere in the darkness about him.

With the utter soundlessness of an Indian upon the trail Odell crept on until he too reached the top floor. He had caught no glimpse of the figure which had ascended before him; but a sharp, scraping noise, as of some heavy object being pulled over bare boards, sounded from the front room on the right, and he recalled that Gene had spoken of an "attic" or trunkroom.

Slowly feeling his way, that no creaking board would betray his presence, the detective approached the door and peered cautiously within. He saw a spacious apartment piled high with trunks and disused articles of furniture, and lighted dimly by two windows, which were heavily barred.

Surely this must be the room in which the aged lunatic, Joshua Meade, had been confined! Not a cheerful place even in daylight; and where was the person who had preceded him?

Odell's gaze wandered about the shadowy corners of the room and then halted as if transfixed, and his eyes widened; while for all his trained self-possession the blood ebbed slowly from his face.

The next moment he had turned and slipped as silently as a shadow down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE TRAP

ODELL did not pause until he reached the first floor once more; then entering the library he locked the door and sank into a chair before the stand upon which stood the telephone. The shock of his discovery, overwhelming in its utter unexpectedness, made his brain reel; and he could almost doubt the evidence of his own eyes in the first moment of stupefaction.

Then a host of small incidents crowded in confirmation to his mind. They had seemed trivial and irrelevant when they occurred; but in the light of the revelation which had just come to him he could have cursed himself for his blindness. He had looked only for the obvious, it was true; yet the solution of the problem had been so obvious from the very first that he had failed to attach any significance to it.

Yet even now his work was not done. The thought brought him to his feet and set him to pacing the floor as if bodily action was necessary to relieve his teeming brain. Despite his knowledge, his absolute conviction of the truth, the case was far from finished; for the culprit could not be brought to account merely on the strength of that which he had just witnessed.

He had not an iota of proof to support any accusation he might make, and the circumstantial evidence which he

could cite would seem ridiculously inconclusive; while as for a possible motive—

Then a light broke over his consciousness, and he struck his hands together sharply. He might not, after all, have been so far wrong in his deductions as to that. Given an incentive far more dominating than he had dreamed, the series of crimes took on at once the aspect of a most subtle and long-planned scheme; and only in its consummation had over-zeal betrayed it to the eyes of the law.

But unless he dared risk exposing to still further danger the several lives of the family whose safety had been tacitly entrusted to him, how could he prove the culprit's guilt beyond any doubt or disclaimer? Merely to accuse, hoping to force a confession, would be not only futile but a warning to the brain against which he had pitted his own that could not fail to be heeded forevermore; and the murders already accomplished must remain unavenged.

Only one means would avail: the culprit must be surprised into self-betrayal. At a moment when success seemed sure and no apparent danger in sight, a blow as unexpected as it would be disastrous to the whole fabric of that sinisterly nurtured scheme must threaten; and in the face of the dread alternative confession would come, in act if not in words.

Even as the detective reached this decision the means by which he might bring about the dénouement suggested themselves to his mind; and a plan sprang full-grown into being. He turned to the telephone, carefully shut off the switch which connected with the upstairs extension, and lifting the receiver, asked in a low tone for Samuel Titheredge's number.

"Sergeant Odell speaking," he announced, still in the

studiously modulated voice, when the attorney's dry, peremptory response came over the wire. "Can you arrange to close your office about half-past two this afternoon and come here to the Meade house? . . . I should like you for a witness . . . Yes, I think the case will be closed shortly . . . No; and when you come please don't mention that I sent for you. I will manage to see you alone for a minute; and I must ask you to obey my instructions implicitly or you may spoil everything. The guilty person will never be brought to justice if a single false move is made . . . I cannot possibly explain further. . . . You'll be here by three? Very good."

He hung up the receiver, unlocked the library door, and started upstairs, when Miss Meade suddenly made her appearance from the dining-room.

"Oh, Sergeant Odell, I've been looking for you," she said as she came forward.

"And I, you." He smiled. "I followed you downstairs more than an hour ago, Miss Meade, but saw you go into the pantry and decided not to bother you."

"I've been to see about some more broth for Cissie," she explained.

"I am so sorry I upset the other." Odell's tone was the perfection of courteous contrition. "It was stupid of me, but your nephew spoke suddenly just behind me, and in the start I gave the cup was overturned."

"Rannie *will* play mischievous tricks like that; but he is still only a little boy in spirit in spite of his precocity, and I cannot find it in my heart to reprove him." Miss Meade smiled deprecatingly. "It didn't matter at all about the broth; for my niece has fallen into a deep sleep, and Doctor

Adams, who is with her now, says that it will be better to allow her to rest for several hours if she can rather than wake her for nourishment. But I must not annoy you with trivial details of this sort. You said that you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Miss Meade; but only to explain about my stupid accident. I hope your niece is resting easier to-day?"

"I don't know." A little worried frown appeared upon her smooth brow. "I do not wish to seem disloyal; but sometimes I think it would be best if we dispensed with Doctor Adams's services, for the children at least. I am old-fashioned and believe in old-fashioned home remedies to a certain extent; but medical science has advanced with great strides of late, Rannie tells me, and I feel at times that Doctor Adams has stood still."

"You are dissatisfied with his treatment of your niece?" Odell asked quickly.

"No-o." Her reply came with an evidence of mental reservation. "But his manner is sometimes unnecessarily severe. He has excluded even me from the room now, and I am sure that Cissie will miss me the moment she awakes."

The pompous little physician evidently intended to follow his instructions to the letter; and Odell merely shrugged politely as he turned once more to the stairs, but Miss Meade held out a timidly detaining hand.

"Please, Sergeant Odell. I—I do not want to ask any questions which are perhaps tabooed, but my anxiety must be my excuse. I meant to ask you yesterday, but my courage failed; and I can learn nothing from either my brother-in-law or Mr. Titheredge. Has anything been discovered about—about the case which brings you here?"

Her voice trembled with eagerness. "Even the presence of your men about the house has not yet brought the realization home to me of—of the unspeakable crimes which have been committed; and yet I know it must be so, and the horror of it is like a living presence. Have you a single clue?"

During the merest fraction of a second he hesitated; for her beseeching eyes seemed to hold his as if she would draw the truth from him in spite of his decision to keep his own counsel until the moment was at hand. Then he threw off the spell and replied gravely but steadily:

"No, Miss Meade. This is the most baffling case of my experience. I appreciate what the fear and suspense must be like to you all, but time alone can solve the problem."

There followed an hour of inaction torturing to the detective in his eagerness to precipitate the climax which he felt would bring success to crown the days during which he had wandered in darkness. At length Peters announced to those of the family who were able to repair to the dining-room that the belated luncheon was served, and Miss Meade, Rannie, and Gene descended.

Odell peeped into Richard Lorne's room to find him dozing peacefully, then hurried to Cissie Chalmers's door and knocked with subdued insistence.

Doctor Adams opened it and presented a face of mild inquiry.

"You administered the opiate, Doctor?"

"Yes, but its effect will wear off in about an hour, I think," the physician responded nervously. "I really do not consider it wise to repeat the dose, but if you insist—"

"On the contrary. It is almost two, now. Would it be

possible to awaken Miss Chalmers at, say, three o'clock?"

"Certainly."

"Will you do so then, and summon Miss Meade—but no one else—to take your place?"

"At three o'clock. I understand, Sergeant. You think that if there was really danger to my patient it will be over then?"

"Absolutely; but since you still doubt that the danger existed you may be interested in knowing that I sent a sample of broth which I suspected of having been poisoned to Villard, the analytical chemist, and he reports unmistakable evidence of white arsenic," Odell added hurriedly. "Not a word of this, however. When Miss Meade has taken your place come to me at once in Rannie Chalmers's room."

"I will, sir; but this confirmation of your suspicions fills me with distress," Doctor Adams declared. "I admit that I was not convinced even after an examination of my patient that she was indeed the victim of such an outrage. In the many years of my professional experience I have never before come into contact with crime; and the comparative monotony of a general practitioner's work must have dulled my perceptions."

"It is not always easy to see a thing, Doctor, even when you are looking for it," Odell replied from the consciousness of the revelation which had come to himself only that morning. "By the way, will it be safe to move Mr. Lorne this afternoon from his own room into that of his stepson next door?"

"Yes, I think so." The physician looked his surprise. "We can assist him through the connecting door between

the two without taking him around by the hall. But what is going to happen in Rannie's room, Sergeant?"

"I have an experiment I want to make; that is all." Odell turned away. "At three o'clock, then, Doctor. I shall depend on you."

It lacked five minutes of the hour when Doctor Adams tapped with an eagerly trembling hand on the hunchback's door and the detective's voice promptly bade him enter. He obeyed to find Richard Lorne already ensconced upon the couch, Gene and Rannie in chairs on either side, and two strange men standing near the foot of the bed conversing in lowered tones with Odell.

Lorne's fat face was tense with excitement, and Gene's was white as chalk; but Rannie sat back with his old mocking smile, and only the vise-like grip of his thin, sallow fingers upon the arms of his chair betrayed the least sign of emotion.

The physician noted their expressions almost mechanically, and then his gaze wandered to the two strangers. Dimly he seemed to remember seeing them hanging about on the sidewalk in front of the house for the past few days—

Odell's voice broke in upon his thoughts. "Your patient is awake, Doctor? You have not left her alone, I trust?"

"No. Miss Meade is with her, as you—"

"Then that is all right," Odell interrupted him in obvious haste. "There is something which I wish to tell you all, but we must wait for a little. I am expecting—"

A discreet knock upon the door interrupted him in turn, and he opened it to find Peters on the threshold.

"Mr. Titheredge, sir."

"Please say that I will be down at once." Odell waited

until the butler had departed upon his errand and then turned to the others: "I shall be back in a moment, and I must ask that none of you attempt to leave the room in my absence. If you do, my men here have their orders as to how to proceed."

The doctor sank into a chair with a gasp; but Lorne twisted irascibly upon his couch.

"Of all the high-handed—", he began.

"Oh, see it through, Dad," Rannie chuckled. "If he has gone to the trouble of arranging this little entertainment for our edification we might at least listen politely. Eh, Gene?"

"I don't know about its being so entertaining," Gene responded nervously. "I rather fancy we are in for a mighty serious quarter of an hour. I've learned that Sergeant Odell knows what he's about."

Thereafter an awkward silence reigned until the door opened again and the detective reappeared accompanied by the family lawyer, whose usually grim, imperturbable face bore a singularly dazed expression.

He nodded to the rest without speaking and took the chair which Odell turned in the doorway to indicate. Then the latter faced the hall once more in an attitude of anticipation, and the strained silence continued.

Minute followed dragging minute, and even Rannie's twisted face lost its satirical grin when at last soft, padded footsteps sounded up the back stairs and Peters again came into view bearing a cup from the steam of which an appetizing aroma rose.

Odell stepped forward, took the tray from his hands and whispered something which the others could not hear, but which the butler seemed to accept without question or sur-

prise; for he bowed and turned away as if to cross the hall.

Then several things happened almost simultaneously. Odell reëntered the room, handed the tray to one of his men who stepped forward to receive it, and turning quickly, locked the door and pocketed the key. The two men, as if by previous instructions, stationed themselves one on either side of the door, and Odell took up the cup from the tray and advanced to the center of the room.

In the electrified stillness there could be heard a sudden stir in the hall, and then the detective as suddenly spoke.

"Randall Chalmers," he thundered, "I want you to drink this cup of broth to the last drop!"

"No! Don't touch it! Don't, for the love of God!" The cry came in a harsh, rasping voice which might have been that of either man or woman, and an unseen hand rattled the doorknob with frenzied strength.

"Drink it!" Odell commanded inexorably; and as the words left his lips there came a resounding crash behind him, the stout door burst inward upon its quivering hinges, and through the aperture a wild figure leaped for the detective's throat; but the two guards seized it and dragged it back as the cup crashed to the floor.

The figure was the frail, delicate form of the mouse-like Miss Meade, but the face was that of a fiend, and the hideous outburst of laughter which shrilled and echoed through the room told all too plainly of the crazed brain unleashed at last.

CHAPTER XXIV

FOLDED HANDS

"HOLD her tight!" Odell's sharp warning cut through the dreadful cachinnation. "Don't hurt her, but look out for a sudden effort of strength."

"Effie!" Unmindful of his broken ribs Richard Lorne had started up on the couch, and his horror-stricken eyes stared at his sister-in-law. "My God, Effie, what is the matter with you?"

At the sound of his voice the woman's wild laughter ceased abruptly, and her body relaxed; but she returned his stare malevolently, and a sneer, infinitely sly and crafty, curled her lip.

"I fooled you all—all!" she cried; and freeing one arm by a lightning-like gesture, she beat her thin breast. "How I have laughed at you here, *here,* in these long years while you have patronized me, thrust me into corners! *Me,* the old maid, the one who stood aside, meek and docile and a nonentity—but useful! Ah, I saw to that! I wanted to be near you where I could watch you all and think of what I had planned!"

"The second generation!" Samuel Titheredge interjected solemnly.

"I hated her always; that yellow-haired vixen who stole my toys and finery when I was a child, whose doll-face

claimed the affection which should have been mine, and who finally robbed me of my lover!" The woman had been muttering, but now her voice rose to a rasping scream. "For I loved him, do you hear? I loved Halsey Chalmers, and she took him from me!"

"Oh, stop her!" moaned Gene, burying his face in his hands. "I can't bear it!"

"Silence!" Odell commanded in a low, penetrating tone. "Let her go on!"

Effie Meade broke into a soft, crooning laugh, more horrible than her wild shrieks had been; and when she spoke again her voice had sunk to a mutter once more.

"I attended her at her marriage to the man who should have been mine; I was present at the coming of her children; mine too, though my arms were empty! And all the time I hated her and waited! Waited! Then the baby, the one that was most like *him,* I—I let it fall from my arms, and it became a cripple, a curse! I could have killed myself from grief, but I lived because I had a double purpose now. She, who could endure nothing but beauty around her, turned in loathing from this maimed thing of her flesh; but I loved the little one as much as I hated her and all the other miserable puppets she had brought into the world; and I meant to see that he had everything, everything which she had hoped to give the rest!"

"You fiend!" Rannie started from his chair; but Odell forced him gently back, and Effie Meade gurgled as if he had called her an endearing name.

"He died, the man she had taken from me, and she married again, but I didn't care; it meant just so much

more for Rannie, to make up for the debt I owed him, and there was plenty of time. I waited, watching the money pile up, watching the other children near the age when they could demand theirs; and at last the hour struck.

"How I planned and studied and worked! Christine I hated most, so I took her first. I listened to Rannie when he told me about the dear little things, smaller than the eye could see, which he kept in the box, and which some day would do my bidding! I dipped the pretty needle in among them one morning, and then watched her as she drew it in and out of her embroidery, waiting until it entered her flesh; for she was clumsy, my beautiful sister, as clumsy as she was stupid. I was my father's own clever daughter, though they called him 'crazy.' *I* was crazy, too, but nobody ever knew it; nobody even guessed; for I watched myself always, always!

"She pierced her finger with the needle, and I could have screamed aloud with joy, only that they would have known, and my work had only just begun. They thought I loved her; they let me stay beside her bed, and over and over again I infected her with a pin dipped in Rannie's tube. She thought at first it was accidental, when I lifted her in bed; but later she suspected the truth. I saw it in her eyes, although those fools of doctors never knew."

Richard Lorne raised his clenched hands above his head and shook them impotently, but the woman did not appear to see. At a motion from Odell her two guards had forced her into a chair; and now she crouched there, mouthing and grimacing in hideous triumph.

"The night she died I crept up to father's room and hid the needle in the folds of the couch on which he spent so

many weary hours. Then I put another needle in that embroidery, in case they looked for it, and went to bed. It had been so easy, and part of her money would be Rannie's now.

"But it was all Rannie's. All the money which was being dissipated by Julian and Gene, thrown away on gewgaws to deck her shallow prettiness by Cissie, like her mother before her. I learned that Julian meant to demand all that had been left him, and so he had to be the next! The little death-germs were gone from Rannie's room; but there were other ways, and I knew that the moment would come.

"One morning I went upstairs while Julian was shaving. He hadn't heard me enter, and as I stood watching him the way was shown to me. I called him suddenly, and the razor slipped and made just a tiny cut in his cheek; but he laid it down and started to staunch the blood. I offered to help him, but I snatched up that razor, and when he bent down for me to touch the towel to his face I slashed his throat instead! I knew just where to strike, for I had been reading Rannie's books, and Christine's firstborn didn't take long to die!

"I put the razor near his hand, ran down and changed my dress, and went to the breakfast-table. How clever I was, then! How surprised I was and concerned when Peters came rushing down with his silly mouth wide open, and how horror-struck I appeared at the truth! If only I hadn't been laughing inside all the time, laughing with joy that one more who had stood in Rannie's path was gone!

"Then the others began to be afraid, and I knew and felt my power! It was sweet to me after the years when I

had been merely tolerated. I used to look around the table sometimes and try to choose which should be next; for they must all go now, and quickly. Every bit of food they put into their mouths meant so much money out of Rannie's pocket, money which would help him to forget the injury I had done him!

"I had read somewhere of a mirror falling and killing someone; and I thought of that heavy portrait over the desk in the library and how I could coax Gene to sit under it; for he would have been of age in another month, and I decided that he must never get his hands on his property or it would be gone in a year.

"I was strong; nobody knew how strong I was—"

"Nobody knows how strong I am!" A raucous echo burst upon their ears; and for a moment the horrified, fascinated gaze of the others turned from the crazed woman to the huge cage in the corner, where Socrates danced excitedly upon his perch and faithfully repeated the message which he had at some past moment of gloating triumph learned from her lips. Odell seized a dark table-cover and threw it over the cage, and the echo died in an indignant squawk.

"I was strong, but I couldn't break that cable which held up the picture until one day I overheard a couple of workmen next me in a crowded car talking about a new electric file and what it would do. I went to an electrical supply shop and saw those files; and one of them went away with me under my cape, although I had asked for and purchased only a toaster. I thought I might need a big saw, too; and that I got at a hardware store over in Brooklyn. Do you see how clever I am? No one could ever know.

"I hid the tools up in father's room until I got Gene's promise to go through the letters of condolence and persuaded him to use that desk that evening. Then in the afternoon when everyone was out I slipped down, locked myself in the library, and filed through the strands of that cable so that they could not hold more than a few hours at most. After that I did the cleverest thing of all! I telephoned to the first carpenter's shop whose number I could find in the book for them to send someone early on the following morning to rehang that picture, before any of the rest of the family were up. I didn't want them to notice those filed cable-ends, and they wouldn't have if only that meddlesome old lawyer there hadn't suggested calling in the police.

"I didn't want that, not just yet with only two gone; for Gene escaped by a miracle. Nobody thought I had had anything to do with the fall of that picture, though; I was too clever for them. I reminded them all that it was I myself who had arranged for Gene to sit there; and even that didn't bring the slightest inkling of the truth to their understanding!

"The police mustn't come, not at least until Gene and one or two more had been removed. I had only that night in which to stop Richard and this idiot Titheredge from interfering with my plans, and I hoped that they would fall downstairs and break their necks in the morning before they could leave the house. That wish brought a new inspiration to my mind, and I got my lovely, bright new saw and crept past the room where they were talking and sawed through the top step of the stairs.

"I never forgot a single detail; that's why no one ever

knew. I gathered up every speck of saw-dust and took it to my room; and the next morning I burned it in the tray of the parrot's cage, which I had removed ostensibly for Jane to clean, and hid the ashes in Gene's grate. The saw and file I put in the tool-chest in the cellar, where anyone might find them. But only Richard was hurt; and the police came, and I had to be on my guard. That strange maid of Christine's was following me about too, and staring at me, as if she had begun to read through my eyes what was going on in my thoughts; and I dared not try another plan I had for getting Gene out of the way because I had to watch myself so closely.

"That wicked Cissie was the means of nearly bringing my secret to light; and for that I determined that she should be the next to go. She tried to run away, and when I stopped her at the very door she sneered at my love for Rannie. I would have killed her then, I think, only the young man from Headquarters was in the drawing-room, and I remembered in time that I must not use strength. My seeming weakness was the most perfect evidence in my defense as long as I could keep people from knowing how strong I really was."

She had babbled on as if talking to herself; and the others sat spellbound, listening as the dreadful story unfolded itself to their ears; and more than once the detective had glanced at Doctor Adams inquiringly. It did not seem possible that one of unsound mind could tell so connected and clear a tale; and the thought recurred that perhaps the woman was feigning insanity. Her hatred and jealousy of her sister and the money-lust combined would have been motive enough for even so hideous a series of crimes; but

when he glanced in turn at her face all doubt died within him. Whether distorted with rage or smiling in malicious triumph, the light of reason had irrevocably fled from it; and the workings of her maniac mind showed plainly in her wildly staring eyes.

Mrs. Gael's words returned to him again, and with them a complete understanding of her attitude. No wonder that in view of her own former detention she dared not speak and proclaim the lunacy of this woman, who with the cunning of madness had concealed her condition from all the rest of the world even while realizing and glorying in it.

Effie Meade had been swaying to and fro in an ecstasy of triumphant glee; but all at once she stopped and glanced at the fragments of the cup upon the floor.

"That too would have worked my will," she muttered. "When Cissie went into the drawing-room to talk to that young upstart from the police who was trying to discover my secret I listened and heard her defame my darling, my Rannie. That minute decided her fate, but I was forced to dissemble. I did not want her to die as Julian had; I wanted her to suffer, to fade before my eyes as her mother had; that mother whom she was so like.

"I delved through Rannie's books once more and found out about the white powder and how easily it could be obtained. I told the clerk in the drugstore that I wanted it to kill rats; and so I did! The rats who stood between my boy and the wealth which I meant should be all his.

"I began to give the arsenic to her the very next day, but it was not until Saturday that she showed the first effects, and when she complained I rejoiced. I had mixed

the powder in her soup and tea when I served her in the old-fashioned way, which Richard had always insisted upon when we were without guests; and when yesterday she took to her bed, it was a simple matter to prepare her broth myself and drop in my dainty seasoning before Marcelle's unsuspecting eyes.

"But I commenced to fear this young police officer; not that he dreamed mine was the hand, but he had probed into my sister's death and her son's, and discovered the severed picture-cables and the sawn stairs. This morning he took from Peters the broth intended for Cissie and spilled it; and when later the Doctor put me out of her room and took my place, I knew they were aware of her real condition; and if I did not want to fail as I had in Gene's case I must work quickly.

"I saved out enough arsenic for a death dose; and mixing the rest in a paste I spread it near a rat-hole in the wainscoting of father's room, where its presence could readily be accounted for if it were found. The powder I had saved I put in a fresh portion of broth intending to give it to Cissie at the first opportunity, but I was too careful to bring it up to her myself; I arranged for Peters to do that, so that in the end he would at least be equally under suspicion with the cook; for why should anyone think that I, the devoted aunt, could desire the death of my lovely niece?

"The opportunity came just now, and as soon as the doctor left me alone with her I rang for Peters to bring up the broth." Suddenly the woman's figure stiffened, and she pointed a shaking finger at Odell. "But for you, Cissie would now have gone the way I paved for her; but Peters

knocked upon the door and told me that you had taken the broth from him once more and said that you wanted it for Rannie, and instructed him to bring up more for Cissie.—*For Rannie!* You would have killed him for whom I had planned it all!

"I saved him, though Cissie and the others still live. Rannie, Rannie, I did it all for you; and though they may rob you of a portion of the wealth which should be yours, you will still be richer than all; and I have made you so!"

She half rose in her chair with her hands outstretched to the object of her insane adoration; but he shrank from her, his eyes like livid coals of fire in his horrified face.

"Don't speak to me, you devil!" Loathing beyond the power of words filled his shaking voice. "If you were not mad I could kill you as you sit there! Murderess! You have done me a greater injury than when I was a child!"

Some inkling of his meaning must have filtered through to her diseased mind; for she began to whimper like a hurt animal and the tears rolled down her faded cheeks.

"It was for you! They hated you, all of them. They laughed at your infirmity; but I would have given you the power to triumph over them, every one!" Her tones rose once again to a shriek. "Rannie, I love you, love—"

The shriek ended suddenly in a rattling gurgle; and she clutched at her breast as the distortion of mania left her face and a look of wonder shot with pain took its place. A glow as of returning sanity suffused the staring eyes for a fleeting moment; then they dulled, and her head dropped forward on her breast.

Odell was by her side in an instant; but Doctor Adams was before him; and the detective retreated a step as the

physician felt the woman's limp wrist and pressed his head against her heart.

Then he straightened and faced the others solemnly.

"She is dead," he announced. "That final paroxysm was too much for her already over-strained heart, and it failed. It was a merciful end."

"Too merciful!" cried Richard Lorne in a voice of agony. "Think of my wife! It was hatred, and crafty, awful revenge, not madness, which brought about her murder. Think of Julian, cut off in his youth!"

"It was the germ of insanity born in her, the heritage from her father." Doctor Adams turned to Blake and Shaw. "Help me lift her to the bed."

The others sat in a stricken silence while the frail little figure was composed upon the snowy coverlet and the hands which unseen had wrought such fearful tragedy were folded peacefully upon her breast.

. . . . . .

"Still I cannot understand, Sergeant, how you first discovered the truth."

Richard Lorne was the speaker as he, Gene, Rannie, Samuel Titheredge, and the detective were seated in his room on the following day. Cissie was slowly recovering under the care of the discreet Miss Risby; and below in the darkened drawing-room the still form of Effie Meade rested where so lately the bodies of her victims had lain.

"The point which puzzles me is why I did not discover it at once," Odell replied frankly. "The finding of the saw and file in so obvious a place as the chest where the other tools were kept ought to have led me to suspect the person who had as obviously suggested that your step-son sit be-

neath that loosened portrait, no matter how unlikely such a supposition would seem.

"Miss Meade had had access to the incubator in which Rannie kept his bacteria and to the medical books of which he had a store, and she had been the only one to listen to his talk on the subject; she had been with her sister when Mrs. Lorne pricked her finger with the infected needle, and she was the only member of the family who was constantly at her bedside, with unlimited opportunity to reinfect her until she died. She as well as another might have slipped up to her oldest nephew's room and, catching him off guard, slashed his throat with the razor. The thing which kept me more than anything else from suspecting was the supposed fact that a struggle must have taken place, and only a powerful person could have overcome Mr. Chalmers's strength; for I had been told that he was a trained athlete in spite of the temporary nervous condition which had pulled him down.

"Only a phenomenally strong person, too, could have pried that picture from the wall and filed away the supporting wires, to say nothing of wielding a saw heavy enough to cut the long, sweeping strokes which I noticed in the top step of the stairs."

"I recall now," Titheredge remarked, "that you asked me when we examined the stairs together if I observed anything else, and when I replied in the negative you said nothing more. What did you mean?"

"The almost entire absence of sawdust," Odell responded. "I traced it afterward and learned how it had been disposed of. Another thing which led me off the track was the gruffness of the voice which spoke to Kenny the car-

penter over the telephone. Miss Meade's was low and clear and softly feminine until she gave that cry outside Rannie's door when she thought he was about to swallow the poisoned broth."

"Oh, Aunt Effie could always do that," said Rannie. "Throw her voice and change its tone, I mean; she used to amuse us when we were kiddies by telling us the story of the three bears—a favorite of ours, I remember—and imitating their growls."

"But how did you first come to suspect her?" Gene asked.

"I did not, until a few hours before I tried that little experiment; but I had already decided that a crazed mind was back of the series of murders and attempted murders. Someone whom I may not name had hinted to me that a member of the household was unquestionably insane, and a little talk which I had with Mr. Titheredge here confirmed the possibility of it." Odell met the attorney's eye and shook his head reassuringly. "Down at Headquarters Peters had told us of a mysterious intruder at the hour of Mrs. Lorne's death, who passed up the stairs to the attic and whom he firmly believed to be a ghost. He did not see it but caught a glimpse of the light it carried and heard it say: 'The first one gone! So shall they all go, one by one!'"

"The she devil!" Lorne groaned. "But what was it that happened a few hours before you tricked her into betraying herself?"

"With Rannie's help I proved yesterday that your eldest stepdaughter was being slowly poisoned by an admixture of white arsenic in her food; and that narrowed the pos-

sible suspects down to Miss Meade, Mr. Gene Chalmers, and the three servants. During the morning I heard footsteps ascending to the very top of the house, and something in their stealthy, almost noiseless tread recalled Peters's story of the ghost to my mind.

"On an impulse I followed; but the person ahead was always just beyond my range of vision until I halted in the doorway of the storage room, the one with the barred windows. Then I saw Miss Meade. With her frail, slender arms she was moving two huge, heavy trunks which were piled one on top of the other; and she seemed to put forth no effort in a task that would normally require the energy of two husky men. I did not see her face at once; but when she turned it toward me the mask was off, and I knew that my search was ended even before I heard her insane speech: 'Eat that, my pretties. I have enough left for Cissie's last dose. I'll fool them all!'

"I made my escape before she was aware of my presence, and decided that the only way to convince any of you of her guilt would be to trick her into betraying herself. The greatest thing in her life was her love, or obsession, for Rannie; and I determined to play upon that. I gathered you in as witnesses, laid my trap, and sprung it as you know.

"I would feel culpable in having brought on the scene which resulted in Miss Meade's death, but there was no other way to bring her machinations home to her; and Doctor Adams has since informed me her case was incurable and that future existence would have meant for her a mere tortured blank. Her superhuman strength was, of course, a part of her madness."

"She is better dead," Titheredge observed in his dry judicial tones. "It is only a pity that her malady did not manifest itself a few short weeks ago; but we have you to thank, Sergeant, that she was prevented from carrying out her hideous scheme to exterminate the family."

"We owe you our lives," Richard Lorne declared brokenly. "When I think of my poor wife I could go mad myself, and it is as well perhaps that her sister is beyond my reach. Sergeant Odell, I shall not speak of reward at this moment; but you will not find me unappreciative of the masterly way in which you have handled this case and brought it to a successful conclusion, nor unmindful of the debt that I and mine owe to you."

Odell rose.

"It was only in the line of my professional duty, sir," he said quietly. "My one regret lies in the solution of the problem—that an afflicted, unfortunate member of your own family should prove to have performed the dreadful, self-appointed work of those unseen hands."

THE END